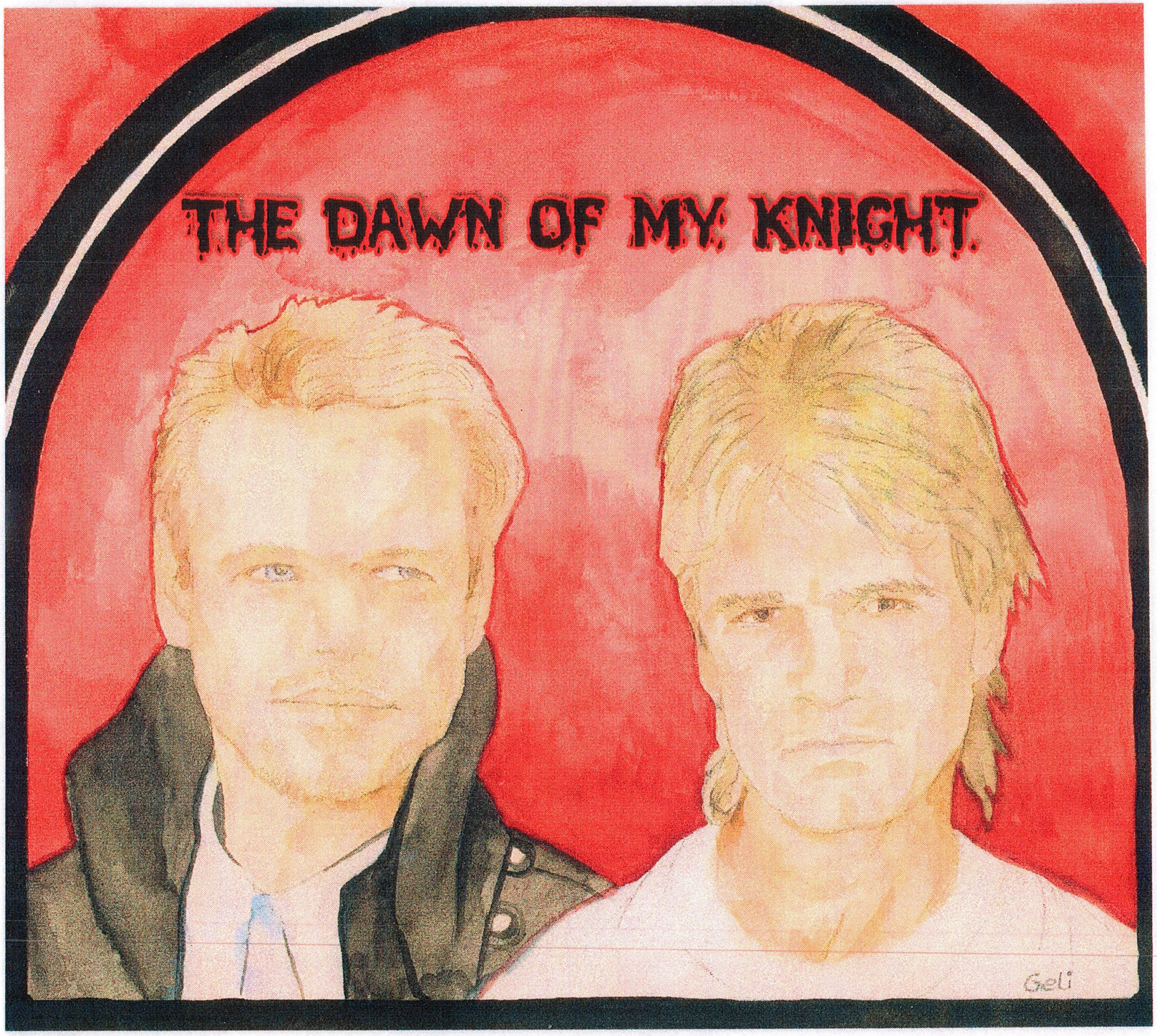
THE DAWN OF MY KNIGHT.
Geli

The Dawn Of My Knight

by

RIMFIRE

Art by Geli <tarismare@yahoo.com>

Author's Note: Many thanks to Wally, Nemesis, Bast and Diana for all their help. They've made this a better story.

This Forever Knight/MacGyver crossover '/' zine produced and copyrighted © October 2001, by:

AngelWings Press
PO Box 6322
Norfolk, VA 23508-0322
USA

Email contact: AWPZines@cs.com

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A Walk On The Darkside -

Mac's Story

My memories of this place aren't all that great. I tried to help Viktor, and I failed. He gave his life to save mine and Pete's and that guy, ah, what's his name, Captain... Captain... uh... Cuzo. Yeah, that's it. I know that was what drove me to hound Pete to get the Phoenix Foundation to set up that deprogramming scheme. The results haven't been great, only five out of the twenty K-Force have been turned around, but I guess five is better than none at all. I just wish Viktor had been around as well. There are some...

"What the...?"

A blur of movement, a fleeting after-image of four long legs and a tail skittering across the road, and I do the instinctive thing and swerve to miss it. The result of that precipitous action has me fighting to keep the car on what euphemistically passes for a freeway round here, and slewing across the bitumen, before sliding off the driving surface and into the growth at the side of the road. Here I sit, holding on to the steering wheel with enough pressure to leave finger marks in it, while I try to regulate my breathing back to what I consider normal as I do a mental inventory to check that yes, I am in one piece, and everything is still in working order. I decide to sit and shake for a while.

An hour or so later, after checking the car over I discover two things. One, the front fender is crumpled. I hit a moss covered log, and I won't be able to drive the vehicle without shredding the tire, because the fender is imbedded in it, and I have no tools to lever it away. I mean, since the car has no spare tire, why would you have a wheel brace? Does this country have something against carrying spare tires? This is the second car that I've driven that was minus a spare wheel. And secondly, even if I get the car going again by some miracle, I won't be able to stop it, because the brake fluid lines have been damaged to the point that they need to be replaced. Even I can't fix what isn't there to be fixed, and the emergency brake? Well what can I say? What emergency brake!?

"Oh, man. I really don't need this kind of problem, right now."

Well, Mac, you've got two options. You can stay with the car and hope that some traffic will come along this way sometime in the next year and be kind enough to stop for a stranger. Yeah, right! Or, you can start walking and hope you make it to the next village or town that has a phone that actually works and arrange for someone to come and collect the car.

I grabbed the backpack off the rear seat of the car, very pleased with an earlier decision of mine to dress for traveling, which for me meant sneakers, blue jeans, shirt and leather jacket. After the last visit when I'd spent a goodly portion of my time traipsing over the countryside in a suit, I'd decided that I was not going to let that happen again!

Two hours into my enforced hike, I hear bells. I must be going nuts! Either that or I'm closer to human habitation than I thought. It's then I hear the added steady clip-clop of horse's hooves. Now, I've seen pictures of Romany wagons pulled by horses, but let me tell you they do not do justice to the real thing. All the traditional designs and pictures, complete with the signs to ward off evil, were on the lead wagon, and the shire-style horses looked as though they could go on forever. It kinda made up for the car trouble.

Now I'll admit I was one surprised guy when the wagon stopped alongside of me, and I was spoken to in English.

"The car back there yours, Mister?"

The voice was young; the roughening that comes with puberty, was only just beginning to make it

unpredictable.

"Yes, I swerved to miss a doe and her fawn, and, well, you can see the results."

Voices parried with each other, one deep, guttural, obviously a man's, the other querulous, wavery, higher pitched, a woman's. The heated conversation continued for a few moments before the woman spoke, shrill and sharp in definite tones of command. The man's answer was begrudging and sullen. My shadowed conversationalist sat through the tirade unmoved.

"You're welcome to ride with us to the next town, Mister. It will soon be dusk, and the night's no place to be out in round here."

I wasted no time in accepting the unexpected.

"Thanks. I wasn't looking forward to having to spend the night walking to the nearest town."

I eased the backpack off and slung it in one hand as I climbed my way onto the seat alongside my conversational partner who turned out to be a boy, with the traditional dark hair and eyes of a true son of Romany. He looked at me with the penetrating way soon-to-be adults have, measuring me. I smiled, hoping for one in return, and was rewarded with a slight smile.

"Name's MacGyver, but my friends call me Mac."

He nodded and clicked his tongue at the horses, and we began moving again. I was content to respect his wish for silence, and I braced my foot on the wood panel in front of me and concentrated on breathing unpolluted air, just watchin' the scenery. It's kinda nice when you can actually see the trees instead of a big green blur. Oaks mingled with beech, birch, and elm. The big time industries hadn't managed to destroy all of the countryside yet, though acid rain was taking its toll. I leaned my shoulder against the wood and settled to do some serious snoozing, but the clatter from inside the wagon was enough to keep me awake.

The wooden panel behind me parted and an arm thrust out, holding a large enameled mug, its steaming contents reminding me that I hadn't eaten for some hours. The woman rattled on for a few moments, which brought a smile to my young companion's face. He nodded and looked at me.

"The soup is for you, mister."

"Me?"

He nodded. About to refuse, I stopped, and did the polite thing and reached for the mug. The edges were hot enough to burn my fingertips. I smiled as I juggled the scalding mug from hand to hand, finally resting it on the seat beside me. Again the thin arm poked out from the wagon, this time with another mug, which my young companion collected gratefully. Two huge bread rolls followed in short order. The driver handed one to me.

"Thanks."

He nodded. I inhaled the aroma of the soup, identifying parsley and onion. I blew across the surface of the liquid, my mouth watering with anticipation. My young companion put down his roll and wound the reins loosely around the brake, then picked up the roll and dunked it in the thick liquid. I shrugged and followed suit. That first mouthful of soup-drenched bread was bliss. I had identified pieces of carrot, potato, pumpkin, turnip and cabbage by the time my mug was empty,

and like the young man beside me, I used the last pieces of roll to clean the inside of it.

"That's the best soup I've had in a long time."

Memories of Mom and me making soup on a cold winter's afternoon intruded, and the old familiar ache underneath my heart tinged the day in gray. I guess it must have showed on my face, for I found myself under scrutiny by dark world-wise eyes.

"Bad memories, mister?"

I shook my head.

"No, good ones, but there's some pain that goes with them."

He nodded.

"The loss of loved ones is always painful."

I wondered briefly how he knew, and then sniffed. Rain on the wind. I looked to the east, and there were the clouds. By the look of them, I was going to get wet. I shrugged mentally. I've been wet before, and will be again. I had a change of clothes in my bag, and it was waterproof, so I'd have something dry to change into later. I looked back, and found myself under scrutiny once again.

"Rain, soon."

I'd certainly picked a real conversationalist for a traveling companion. I nodded, unconcerned as the water droplets began to fall. I tucked my hands under my armpits and settled back. At least I didn't have to walk through the rain. Things could have been a hell of a lot worse than they were. A rustling next to me heralded an oilskin. This was handed to the boy. He offered it to me. I shook my head. He was the one driving. He smiled and shrugged into it and then spoke rapidly at the windows. The wavery tones of an older woman answered him, and he nodded.

"You are to ride inside the wagon where you will be warm and dry."

"I don't want to intrude on your family."

"You won't. Besides my grandmother wants to talk to you."

"You sure I won't be intruding?"

"I'm sure."

I nodded and dropped down from the wagon, waiting 'til the side panel went past and then grabbed hold of the edge as the back door swung open. I hauled myself in and turned to close the door. The amount of light dropped dramatically. It was a few seconds before my eyes adjusted to the dimmer lighting. The gruff voice belonged to a swarthy, dark-haired man, with a lustrous moustache that Jack Dalton would have envied. The piercing brown eyes stared at me the way the younger version had done earlier. He looked his fill and then concentrated on lighting the dark wood pipe clenched between his stained teeth.

"Sit here, mister."

The voice belonged to a child of nine or ten, wearing faded and patched clean jeans, a much-mended brown pullover and bright yellow rubber boots. A cheeky smile complete with a dimple showed off perfect white teeth, and a thatch of uncombed black hair nearly obscured deep brown eyes.

"Thank you."

I sat on the seat near the old woman, her face seamed and lined with life's journey. Her road had not been a smooth one if the lines were an indication of the cares and woes she had suffered through her years. Her gray hair was brushed back into a tight bun, held by many pins and combs. Wise brown eyes stared through me all the way to my soul. She had the same unnerving way of stripping away my defenses as Mom had always had. Did it go with the territory of motherhood? All I knew was that I wouldn't be able to hide the truth from her anymore than I'd been able to from Mom, or Grandma while she'd been alive. I know I squirmed, and she smiled and nodded her head. She smoothed her skirt and clasped her hands before talking to the child. He looked at her and nodded.

"Where are you goin' mister?"

"To the nearest village to get a car or a bus to the airport."

"You American?"

"Yes."

"A gift for your journey, mister, 'cause you respect the world you live in. She will tell you the path your life will take."

I looked up, unsure of how to refuse the offer without offending, and then decided to accept. It wouldn't harm anyone would it?

"Thank you, ma'am."

The boy translated and the old woman chuckled and spoke to the boy. He blushed and looked at his boots.

"Um, excuse me, but what did she just say?"

The boy looked up and cleared his throat.

"She said you got good manners. Your Mother brunged you up right. She said I could learn from you how to speak to my elders."

"Oh. Sorry."

He shrugged. "She's right."

He turned to her and let loose a torrent of Romany, and then she reached out and ruffled his curls and chucked him under the chin, before turning to me and holding out her hand. I looked at the callused pal, and covered it with my hand, dwarfing it. She peered at my palm for a long time before speaking. The boy translated.

"Your life line is extra long. It means you will live a very, very long time. You have had many worries and much sadness in your life. The emptiness in your love life will soon be filled. Your lover will be tall, strong, caring."

He stopped, and it was then I realized I was shaking my head. I looked up. She was looking at me, and the words came spilling out before I could stop them.

"I won't... can't... people I love get hurt... die... 's my fault..."

She shook her head, and continued to talk. The boy translated.

"Darkness, much darkness and evil, soon."

Both made the sign, warding against evil, and the old woman reached into a basket by her side and withdrew something. It turned out to be a cross made from horseshoe nails on a leather thong. She held it out, and loosed another spate of words. The boy waited until she had finished speaking and then turned brown eyes wide with fear towards me. The hair on the back of my neck was standing on end, and I didn't even think of refusing the gift.

"While you are in this land never, ever, ever, take it off. It will keep you from evil, but you must always, always wear it until you are safely home. Please, remember. Wear it always. It will protect you."

I nodded, my mouth suddenly dry, and I leaned forward so that the old woman could place the cross over my head. I looked down at the cross and then lifted the thong and put it inside my shirt against my skin, starting a little at the cold of the metal the instant before my body heat warmed it. She reached for my hand once more, but the wagon stopped and the man-child driving called back. I did not understand the words, but moved when the man did. The rain was falling more heavily, and it wasn't long before my shirt was clinging to my skin. I walked round to the front of the wagon and could see the two figures crouched over one of the horse's legs. The man said something and trudged back towards the wagon. I walked to the horse, and it was then I could see the problem. It had cast a shoe. I looked round but couldn't find it anywhere nearby. The man returned with a new shoe, a rasp, a hammer and a mouthful of nails. The lad held the horses' heads as the older man lifted the great leg and began to use the rasp. I moved forward, coming round wide and from the front so that the horses wouldn't get spooked and grasped the bridle of the far side horse. The huge head swung down, and I gently breathed into the huge nostrils and waited for the horse to return the compliment. Scent of sweet grass and hay flooded my nostrils, and I rubbed the bony area between the great limpid eyes, and looked up to see dark brown eyes watching me.

"You know horses."

"I know a little about them."

"You are used to horses. They know."

The last strike of the hammer, and the heavy leg thudded to the ground, and the horse shook itself, setting the harness jingling. The man straightened and strode back toward the wagon. I followed as the horses were urged on once more.

As I swung myself up into the warmth of the cabin, I was handed a towel. I dried myself off as best I could and sat in the warm, dim room, allowing the heat to soak into me. I settled back, letting my body rock with the wagon.

The jolt of the wagon woke me, and I snapped awake, to see the old woman smiling at me and nodding.

"We've reached the village, mister. We're goin' to camp outside, and you're welcome to stay with us if'n you want."

I looked at the youngster before looking at the woman, and shook my head.

"Thanks for the offer, but I've intruded on your hospitality too much as it is. My thanks, Grandmother, for your words and gift."

And I touched the outlined cross, before reaching for her hand and kissing it. She smiled and nodded as the boy translated my words. She spoke again, and the boy spoke one final time.

"Go with God, mister, go with God."

"God keep your family safe, Grandmother."

And I stepped from the wagon and moved round to the front. The driver handed me my backpack.

"Thanks."

He nodded and urged the horses on. As it began to move once more, I raised my hand in farewell.

I looked round in the late afternoon sun at the village, such as it was. A church, an inn, a shed with an aged gas pump out front, and six thatched cottages, all heavily shuttered, were the sum total of habitation that I could see. Several chickens scratched in the dirt at the front of one of the cottages with window boxes filled with scarlet geraniums. A tabby cat lay sprawled across the front step of another cottage. Curtains twitched, but no one came outside. I lifted my backpack onto my shoulder and headed towards what I thought was the inn. I couldn't read the sign because it was covered in black material, but I figured that maybe they would be able to tell me if there was a way of getting to the next big city. I didn't see any telephone lines. Maybe I could hire a cart or something.

"Excuse me, can I help you?"

Startled, I turned round. The traditional long cassock of the Roman Catholic priesthood, complete with tasseled belt cord, and crucifix confronted me. The man was tall and thin, his black hair cut severely short, his face lean and hollow cheeked, his eyes a piercing blue.

"If you could point me in the direction of the inn, Father, I'd be most grateful. I think it's that building over there, but I can't see the sign clearly."

"I'm afraid the inn is closed, Mr...?"

"MacGyver, Father...?"

"Jansci. Yes, the inn is closed. There has been a death in the village, and everyone is sitting in vigil

over the body."

I nodded, inwardly cringing. I had no desire to see a dead stranger. I've seen enough dead friends to last me all my life.

"Is there a telephone anywhere about?"

He shook his head.

"What seems to be the problem? Perhaps I can help?"

"I need to arrange for transport to the next large town, Father. I swerved to miss a doe and her fawn, and my car came off second best with an old log. The Romany's were kind enough to give me a lift here, but I'm kinda stuck without transport."

"I can be of service to you, then, Mr. MacGyver. The weekly bus leaves for Genzchic at seven thirty tomorrow morning. You will be able to hire a car in Genzchic. For tonight, I can offer you a bed in my house next to the church."

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble, Father, I'd really appreciate it. I don't fancy sleeping out of doors tonight."

"It is no trouble at all. Please follow me."

The house he led me to was near the church. I had to duck under the door lintel. Inside it was whitewashed with lime. The furniture was plain wood, a table and several chairs, and the air was tinged with wood smoke. In front of the fireplace with a cheery fire going in the grate, a covered footstool sat next to a large wooden armchair. A kettle sang merrily on the hob, and a black cast iron pot was suspended over the blaze, its contents bubbling. A cross hung above the fireplace. In the far corner, a small statue of the Virgin stood in an alcove, a plain wooden kneeler with a votive candle at her feet.

"Be welcome in my home."

"Thank you."

"Please, put your things over by the wall. I was just about to have a meal. Will you break bread with me? I'm afraid all I have to offer is soup. As it is Friday, I am allowed no meat, only fish, but the man who has died is the fisherman, so there is no fish."

"That's okay with me, Father."

After a simple but filling meal, Father Jansci banked the fire before turning to me.

"Will you be all right in the house by yourself, Mr. MacGyver? I have to stand vigil over the body for the third and final night, but I'll be back in time to breakfast with you and see that you get to the bus on time. There's hot water in the kettle, and a bowl in the bedroom with a spare towel for you to use for your ablutions. Please feel free to sleep in my bed this night, for I'll not be using it."

"Thanks, Father, but I'll be fine. If you have a blanket you can spare, I'll be more than happy to sleep in front of the fire."

"You are sure you don't mind staying here by yourself?"

"I'll be fine, thanks, Father."

"Be sure you do stay inside, Mr. MacGyver. There are brigands in these parts. That's how the fisherman died. If you'll excuse me, I must be starting my vigil."

I nodded, and Father Jansci began to collect various things from around the room and put them into a material bag.

Once the good Father had left, I walked into the bedroom and collected the enamel bowl, towel and soap and headed back into the main room. I used one of the chairs propped under the door latch to ensure my privacy and put the bowl in front of the fire, pouring some of the scaldingly hot water from the kettle to cool. I shed my shirt and t-shirt, and put the cross on top of the table so I wouldn't get the leather strap wet, and got on with the job of making myself presentable.

Ablutions completed, I released the chair from under the door latch and opened the door and stepped out into the full of night to empty the dirty water onto the good Father's geraniums. A wolf howled in the distance, and I stopped to listen for other calls, but the one was all I heard. I looked up, and the wonder of the stars strewn on the black velvet of the night sky took my breath away. With no spillage of light from electric lights to dampen their glory, I could see so many constellations and name them easily.

"Wondrous aren't they?"

The voice took me by surprise and I jumped.

"Forgive me for startling you, Sir. I am Count Grigor. I was looking for Father Jansci."

"He's holding vigil for the fisherman who was killed."

"Ah. Then I shall not disturb the good father. Perhaps I might spend some time conversing with you about the stars. They are a passion of mine, which I do not often get to share with others. Most of the people round here have more mundane matters to concerns themselves with and see the stars as merely the lights of heaven."

The voice was rich, and the count moved closer to the light spilling from the doorway. He was thin and tall, with high cheekbones, and curly, black hair, hanging to the collar of his dark jacket. He held a walking cane with a silver top in his right hand, and his eyes... his eyes...

Sunlight streaming through the curtains woke me, and I stretched, wincing as various muscles complained. My neck was particularly stiff. My little episode with the wildlife yesterday must have done more damage than I'd expected. I checked my watch. Six o'clock. Time to be up and movin', Mac. I looked at the fire. There were a few coals still glowing, so it wouldn't be hard to get the fire going once I'd located some kindling. I clambered out of the heavy quilt Father Jansci had given me and shivered in the morning chill. Must be coming down with something, or could be a reaction to the events of yesterday. I pulled on my shirt and sneakers. When I grabbed my jacket, something fell onto the floor. The cross. I reached down and grabbed it and put it on, and then dragged my pack close and dug out the battery razor. As it chirred over my face fuzz, I wandered outside to see if I could see a woodpile.

Round the back of the cottage was a tiny wooden shed with a large wood block in front of it. I

ducked my head and looked inside. The axe head gleamed dully in the dust filled air. It hung against the far wall along with a long handled hoe and a spade. I dodged spider webs and sneezed three times before I could grab the axe and head out into the light again. It's been some time since I've had the pleasure of splitting wood for a fire. Boyhood memories came flooding back as I hefted the axe and brought it down on the first round of wood. The thud of the axe coupled with the split of wood fibers and smell of spruce made me smile. I could still hear Mom's voice.

"You be careful of that axe! It's razor sharp. I don't want to be picking up pieces of you along with the wood."

And she'd been there to bind up my hands when the blisters burst, and to rub in the wintergreen cream when my shoulders knotted up. My grandpa Harry'd been the one to show me how to stop the blisters and how to get a rhythm going that wouldn't result in the screaming agony from abused muscles.

"Let the axe do the work, Bud. If you're going to split a heap of logs make sure you bind your hands first, to prevent the blisters, or soak 'em in vinegar for a couple of days before you plan to cut wood, to toughen 'em. Once you get the axe in your hands do a couple of practice swings so you can loosen up your muscles. When you swing the axe high, let the momentum of its down stroke help you."

Harry never told me it was physics he was teachin' me. Was just common sense, he said. Funny how uncommon "common sense" is these days. I stepped into the rhythm of the axe swing and soon had a neat pile of logs. I chose one split and did some shaving to get the stack of kindling I wanted, and then gathered an armful and headed back to the cottage.

I stacked the wood to one side of the fire and set the kindling in place, and kept an eye on it as I shook out the quilt and folded it. I placed it on one of the chairs and turned back to see that flames were licking along the kindling, devouring it hungrily, so I put a couple of the heavier logs in position to catch and squatted in front of the meager warmth. I must be tired; I don't usually feel the cold this much. I was still holding my hands to the fire when the door opened, and Father Jansci walked in. He carried a jug and a cane basket.

"Good morning, Mr. MacGyver. How did you sleep?"

"Morning Father. Well, thank you."

He looked to the fire that was burning brightly in the grate.

"Thank you for keeping the fire going."

"It was the least I could do."

He put the jug on the table along with the basket and moved closer to the warmth before looking at the pile of wood nearby.

"There was no need for you to cut wood, Mr. MacGyver."

Mom always said you repaid hospitality any way you could.

"I needed the exercise, Father."

He sighed and flexed his shoulders before rubbing his hands over his face. The circles under his eyes told of a long and tiring vigil.

"Thank you. I own it was a task I was not looking forward to doing today. You have cut me enough to last this day and the next. Will you break fast with me? I have warm milk and fresh bread rolls. You will have time to eat before the bus arrives."

I nodded and finished stowing my things in my backpack and came to the table as Father Jansci poured out the milk and placed the hot rolls onto the table, still wrapped in a white cloth. The tantalizing smell of fresh bread made my mouth water, and my stomach rumbled loudly. I flushed, I know I did.

"'Scuse me."

The priest smiled and nodded.

"You but echo my feelings, Mr. MacGyver."

He filled a thick mug full of milk and handed it to me, along with two small rolls, and then bent his head and began grace. I waited as he thanked God for his fare and echoed his "Amen" before sipping the milk. Goat's milk has a taste all of its own, and you develop a liking or not for it pretty quickly. I didn't dislike it, but it wasn't likely to become my favorite tipple. The rolls on the other hand were light and buttery and definitely addictive. Father Jansci pushed a further two rolls my way, but I hesitated to take them, fearing that they were his bread ration.

"Mistress Visekruna makes the best sweet bread in the village, and upon hearing that I had a guest gave me twice my daily bread."

"Please thank her for me."

He nodded and began to devour another roll.

We ate in companionable silence, and I was gathering up my mug to wash when I heard a

gasping, gurgling rattle. Father Jansci stood up.

"The bus has arrived, Mr. MacGyver. Please come with me while I talk to Matais."

I left the mug and grabbed my backpack and followed the priest out into the sunshine.

The bus was ancient, with steam venting from under the hood, the entire body shaking and rattling. THIS was going to get me to the next town? Father Jansci seemed totally unconcerned, as well he might be, for it wasn't his life he was entrusting to this rattletrap. He was speaking rapidly to the bus driver, who, cap in hand, was nodding and bowing to him. I was beckoned over and introduced.

"Matais here will let you know when to get off the bus, Mr. MacGyver."

"Thank you. I really appreciate that."

Matais nodded and smiled, showing stumps of tobacco stained teeth and almost knocking me over with his garlic saturated breath.

"Please, on."

He gestured to the bus, and I got the gist. I was to board the bus. I turned to Father Jansci and shook hands.

"Thank you for your hospitality and help, Father."

"You are welcome, my son. Matais' English is limited to a few words, but you should be able to understand each other well enough."

"How much is the bus fare, Father?"

I reached into my pocket, but he covered my hand with his.

"There is no cost involved, Mr. MacGyver."

He smiled at me.

"Only a task. To render aid to some other traveler in need."

I nodded.

"Will do, Father. And thanks once again."

I got on the bus and sat in the seat by the door with my backpack on my lap, and waved as the bus pulled out of the town. It seems I was the only passenger so far. I turned up the collar of my jacket and thought longingly of a hot shower and clean clothes.

Several hours later, when I thought my fillings were finally going to fall out from all the shaking and bumping, the din mercifully stopped. My ears were still ringing, and I couldn't quite make out what Matais was saying, but the hand gestures needed no translation. I grabbed my backpack and stood, waiting a few moments for the turmoil in my inner ear to settle down and figure which way really was up, before stepping off the bus. Matais honked the horn, which made my frazzled nerves even more so, but I managed a smile and a wave. He revved the engine, and the bus spewed great gouts of black smoke. I stepped back and held my breath as the rattling and groanings intensified. The ancient transport shuddered, shivered, and leapfrogged forward before sputtering some more and then chugging off. I shook my head, amazed that it still managed to stagger onward.

Three days later there I was, sitting in Pete Thornton's office, my sunglasses blocking out the sun's glare, dozing lightly as I waited for him to come back from a meeting. Damn, I must be getting old. This last trip has really drained me. I'm still tired. I can't sleep at night. I keep waking at the slightest sound. My teeth hurt like crazy, and the smell of food cooking makes me throw up. Must be the flu. Just what I don't need!

The door opening sent me into orbit.

"What's wrong, Mac?"

The Director for Operations of the Phoenix Foundation walked to his desk, observing me as he went. The sun bounced off his balding pate, and his gray suit covered a generous girth that many had mistaken for flab. A mistake they had learned to rue. His purposeful stride carried him past me and I was aware of the piercing gaze from his blue eyes. A frown creased his forehead.

"You look awful."

"Well thanks for the compliment, Pete."

"You'd best go home and go to bed. Looks like you've got the flu. I'll send Doc Butcher round to check you over. You're off all assignments until you're one hundred percent fit. You're grounded as of now."

"Thanks."

"Boy, you really are sick."

"What'ya mean?"

"No denials, no fake good humor, no arguments. Usually I have to endure all three before I get my way. Go home, Mac, before you give it to me and the rest of the staff."

I struggled up, wincing as a surge of pain went through my teeth, and trudged out of the office. I stopped by Janice's desk.

"Janice can I ask a favor?"

She looked up, and her ready smile faded to concern.

"Sure."

"Can you call a cab for me?"

"Not a problem. You head downstairs, and I'll ring for one now."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

I hate heights, or is it that they hate me? Anyway, the elevator ride played merry hell with my vertigo, and I literally reeled out of it at ground level. Bob, the supervising security guard, was there to catch me.

"Janice was right, Mac. You look terrible."

"Gee, thanks."

He propped me up against the nearest wall, while I fought a brief skirmish with my stomach and won, temporarily at least. I let my head rest back against the wall and concentrated on making my body behave.

"You ok, now?"

I nodded.

"Good. 'cause your ride's here."

I straightened up, and Bob let go and hovered as I walked to the cab. The sunlight made my skin tingle, and by the time I reached the houseboat, it felt as though someone had played a blowtorch over my face. Even the taxi driver seemed concerned enough to ask if I needed help. I managed to wave him off, but he stayed 'til I was inside.

I pulled the curtains closed and staggered over to the couch and collapsed onto it. The next thing I remember is the doorbell ringing. I heaved myself upright and managed to croak out a welcome.

"Come on in, Chris."

Dr. Christine Butcher is on retainer to the Foundation. I've always thought that Butcher was a rather unfortunate name for a doctor. It's definitely not a case of Butcher by name, Butcher by trade. Mind you, she certainly doesn't look like a doctor, more like a model. Which is exactly what she used to be once upon a time. But as Chris once said, you can't stay a model all your life, and once you're past your use by date - which for models can be as early as twenty-five, would you believe this – then you'd better be able to do something else.

Her once waist-length long black hair is now fashionably short. Personally, I liked it long, but Chris said long hair is the pits when you're working eighteen-hour days.

"Mac?"

"Huh?"

"I've spoken to you three times already. You look as though you're burning up. How do you feel?"

"Pretty lousy. I'm tired all the time, my teeth hurt, I can't sleep and the mere thought of food makes me want to vomit."

"Let me have a look see."

"You're the doctor."

Anything else I had to say was swallowed as she shoved a thermometer in my mouth. I learned very early on not to talk to Chris when she shoves one of those gadgets in my mouth. I'd only done it once, and she took undue advantage of my weakened condition to put it elsewhere on my person.

She placed her hand on my forehead. It felt cool. I noticed she was frowning. Not a good sign. I jumped as the disk of her stethoscope touched my skin. It was cold. I watched her as she watched me. Her dark blue eyes ranged over me in her clinical "doctor" mode. She pulled the thermometer free and looked at it, her lips pursed. Those lips had sold millions of dollars of lipstick, coffee, and perfume, not to mention cars, to the unsuspecting public.

"You're running a temperature, and you're flushed. Aches in any other parts of your body apart from the teeth?"

"No."

"You're showing symptoms of the flu. You been overseas lately?"

"Yes. In Eastern Europe."

"That could be it. Keep your fluids up, rest, Tylenol for the aches if they get really bothersome, and I'll check on you tomorrow. No saving the world, Mac, I mean it. You don't catch it now and treat it seriously, and you could end up in the hospital like last year. Want a repeat of that?"

"No way."

"Then follow my instructions. Eat if you feel like it, but make sure you drink plenty of fluids. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Take care. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon, late. If you feel worse call me. You know my number."

I nodded and watched as she gathered her things. I began to push myself off the couch. She forestalled me.

"I know my way out. You stay put."

And with that she left, and I lay back down on the couch. I'd get a drink in a minute.

I woke some time later and headed for the refrigerator. My mouth felt like I'd been eating carpet. I hauled the bottle of grape juice out and poured a glassful and took a swig. I ran my tongue over the front of my teeth and stopped. My left canine felt loose. I tested it again with my tongue. Yep, no doubt about it. It was loose. Very, very loose. I took hold of it between forefinger and thumb and then stood absolutely still. I swallowed and then moved my hand away and down. My eyes followed, and there was my tooth. Complete, and whole, and in my hand. I wanted to check where it had come from but other overwhelming needs took over. Were there any other loose teeth? Frantically I ran my tongue over the others, gasping when I felt the right canine move. I probed it with my tongue and felt it fall into my mouth. Frantically I spat, and it landed in my hand. It, too, was complete and whole. No give away taste of iron that tells of a bleeding socket. I swallowed and went in search of a mirror and looked. No bleeding, the gums looked healthy enough, but what...

I was definitely shaking by the time I had finished looking. There were new teeth coming down from the gum. It was a bit late in life to be getting a final installment on my adult teeth, and why only these two? Maybe there would be more. I'd have to mention it to Chris when next I saw her. Needless to say I did NOT feel like sleeping after that little discovery. I decided to sit outside for a while in the hope that my over active imagination and the very healthy dose of fear I was filled with would ease under the soothing influence of wave motion.

I grabbed a jacket and opened the door and sat down on the decking with my back against the houseboat wall. The night was particularly beautiful. Too much light here to see the stars clearly, but I could see the boats well enough, and hear the movements of the night creatures.

A sudden squeal, and I knew a rat had met Marmaduke, Tom Pulley's huge black tomcat, the terror of mice and rats everywhere on the docks. He often laid a catch of twenty to thirty cold furry

bodies on Tom's doormat each morning. That little haul didn't include the ones he ate, either. Every so often, I'd hear him crunching bones outside on my patio, and in the morning there would be the rat and mice tails all laid out neat and tidy in a row on my doorstep. So I'd know he'd been doing his job proper, Tom said. Marmaduke had a lot of job satisfaction, he said, knowing I appreciated his efforts. Frankly, I thought Marmaduke did it out of spite. He's not high on my list of favorite animals, and he knows it. Still, he does a service and saves me the cost of traps and disposing of the body of evidence, so to speak.

I sat outside, breathing in the air 'til the first hues of dawn stretched dainty fingers across the bay, and then I went inside. The couch was beckoning, but first I checked on my teeth. The new canines seemed to be descending in a normal fashion, and no others were loose. Slightly relieved, I finished the glass of grape juice, gagging on the sweetness of it, but managing to keep it down, and went back to the couch. I flopped down onto it and closed my eyes. The light coming from the windows was irritating, so I drew the curtains and lay down once again.

The next thing I remember is the doorbell, and Chris back again.

"Hi, Mac. How do you feel?"

"Frightened."

She dropped her bag on the coffee table and came to take hold of my hands.

"What's wrong?"

"My teeth are falling out. I lost two canines last night."

"Let me see."

I opened my mouth, and she peered into it. Then she drew back, and her lips were pursed.

"Fine. You've had your little joke."

"It's no joke, Chris. Look."

I held out the two teeth that had come from my mouth. She collected them and stared at them.

"They seem real."

"Damn right they are. They came out last night."

She looked at me, and I met her gaze.

"You're serious, aren't you?"

I nodded. She drew in a deep breath, and bent to examine the teeth more closely. Then she put them to one side.

"I'll get the lab to run some tests on them. Any others loose?"

I shook my head.

"Not so far."

"Let me know if any others come out. Though the replacements seem fine. How about the rest of you?"

"I'm still tired, and I can't face food yet, but I am keeping up my fluids."

"Good. A couple more days and we'll try some light foods. I'll come by again tomorrow. And I'll do a blood test."

I grimaced. I'm not a big fan of needles.

"Get some rest, Mac."

"That's all I've been doing."

"Fine. Do some more of it."

And she was gone again.

I don't remember falling asleep, but I must have done so, for when I woke it was dusk. I forced down another glass of grape juice and promptly lost most of it. The mere thought of food had my stomach tying itself in knots, so I went outside. The night was tinged in purples and mauves, and I decided to go for a stroll down to the end of the moorings.

I wandered down past the yachts and tenders, and saw Marmaduke stalking a rather large rat. The rodent never knew what hit it. There was a squeal, a threshing of limbs, and it was all over. Marmaduke began his first course for the evening. I looked away as he began to gnaw on the far back leg. He always saves the head for last. I guess it tastes better. I decided that I didn't need to see it and wandered on.

A curse up ahead heralded the arrival of Mr. Bosewater. He insists that he doesn't need a light to check on the moorings and invariably falls over his mooring bollard. We ended up fishing him out of the bay last week. Another curse. He's dropped his keys. I heard them fall. I walk a little closer, and I can see them, lying just out of his reach by the mooring ring.

"Your keys are three feet in front of you, Mr. Bosewater. By the mooring ring."

"That you, MacGyver?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Well bring your light closer. I can't see a damn thing."

It's then I realize I don't have a light, nor do I need one. So I walked over and picked up the keys.

"Here are your keys."

And I reached out and took hold of his hand and put the keys in it.

"Damn it, MacGyver, don't creep up on a man my age. You took ten years off my life coming out of the dark like that."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"Hmmf! See that you don't in future."

And off he stomped. He's not what you call real friendly, but what he doesn't know about the tides round here isn't worth knowing.

There's a rustle and a squeak at my feet, and I see the cheeky fur face about to go for my shoelaces, but I beat him to it, and I have him dangling in my hand before he even registers that he's being held. I feel the life force beating through his body, and there's the smell of fear. The soft brown fur tickles my tongue. Fur? Tongue! I gag as I realize that I'm about to bite a rat. I fling the warm body as far away from me as I can before I drop to the decking, shaking.

When I finally stop trembling, I wipe my hands down my jeans trying to get rid of the feel of the warm furry body of the rat that lingers on my skin, and then I head home for a frantic session of showering. I must be going nuts!

Dawn finds me face down on the couch. I push myself upright and shake my head. Wow! That was one hellish, fever- driven nightmare!

I head to the bathroom to shower and shave, and flinch. The sunlight's so damn bright! It's not only making my eyes water, it's painful too. So, I go find my sunglasses, and with them on, I can stand the light. I've never been this photosensitive. I've never had trouble with my eyes before. I've always taken care of my eyes and read the literature about sunlight and eye damage and cataracts. Maybe I need to mention this to Chris when I see her. I mean, I had the flu

last year, and I didn't lose teeth, or suffer from sore eyes then. Why now? A new strain perhaps? I find a new problem. How the hell do I stop the sunglasses from fogging up in the steam? I tried taking them off, but it was agony. The slicing light had me hunched over and groaning. I couldn't get the glasses back on fast enough.

After I showered and shaved, I dressed and headed downstairs for a drink. I knew if I didn't keep my fluids up, Chris would have me in the hospital so fast my head'd spin. The sunglasses helped ease the ache in my eyes. I looked at the glass of grape juice and sighed. I really didn't want it. I picked it up and headed to the couch, collecting the remote control to the television as I went. I aimed it at the set and the strains of "The Nightstalker" filled the room. I figure I can stand this rerun, so I settled back to watch Darren McGavin as Kolchak begin his investigations into this week's strange happening.

I don't remember falling asleep. One minute, I'm watching Kolchak walk down this dark, dripping corridor, the next thing I know, it's dusk, and Chris's face swims into view.

"Hi, Mac."

I make some intelligent grunt and rub my hands over my face trying to rub away the sleep drowsiness that's got me so lethargic and sit up.

"Good to see that you're keeping your fluids up."

And she nods in the direction of the grape juice sitting on the coffee table. I don't tell her that it's the only glass of fluids that's been anywhere near me today. I nod, and then slump back against the back of the couch as she pulls the tourniquet and syringe and test tubes for a blood sample from her bag.

"I know needles aren't your favorite thing, but it's the only way I know to try and sort out what you've caught, short of slapping you in hospital."

"Too many bad memories wrapped up in needles, is all."

Like the East Germans who poisoned me for a list; the Russians who caught me that time; the junkie who tried to share his HIV positive misery of full blown AIDS with anyone he could stab; the Neo Nazis who wanted me to build them a bomb, and when I wouldn't, turned me inside out with hallucinogens. The list goes on. I *hate* needles. But, I knew Chris was only trying to help me, so I rolled up my sleeve and looked the other way while she made a pincushion outta me.

"There. All done. The results'll be back within a day or two. I'm pretty sure you've brought back a new type of flu bug, but I want to be one hundred percent certain that I haven't missed anything else by jumping to conclusions."

I nodded and rolled my shirtsleeve down.

"You're looking quite pale, Mac, some sunshine might help. Once the storms scheduled for the bay have passed, spend some time in the sunlight. It won't hurt, and it might even help. Make sure you wear sun screen though."

"The light's too bright. I ended up with my eyes watering so bad I couldn't see, and it felt as if someone had begun carving slices of my brain this morning when I showered. Had to wear my sunglasses to get any relief."

She frowned and pulled her penlight from her bag. She aimed it at my right eye, and all I could see was little dancing lights. Then she switched to my left eye and repeated the process.

"They seem fine. The light reflex is working properly. Might be a symptom of this new bug. Do what you feel comfortable doing. You listen to what your body's saying more than most. It will let you know what it can cope with. Take care, Mac. I'll come past when I've got the results of the tests, but if you need me before that give me a call. Now, do you need any help getting battened down for the storm that is headed this way? Pete's had the gear from your lock-up moved to a Phoenix storage facility, and he, Susan and Steve are ready to help you here. So am I. You're my last patient for today."

"Storm?"

"You obviously haven't been listening to the weather reports. There's a big one headed this way, and a level four warning's just gone out."

"Oh, man. How long before it hits?"

"Four days. Your houseboat's the only one left in the moorings here. Everybody else has upped anchor and headed for safer harbor. A Tom Pulley said to give him a yell when you're ready to go."

Everything seemed to slow down and speed up into overdrive all at once. The batteries were on permanent charge, so there'd be no problem about power. I'd made sure that they'd been well and truly secured in waterproof containers, so no problems with them shorting out. I didn't own a candle or a lamp powered by any kind of combustible liquid. Not on a wooden houseboat! The floor coverings were of an eminently sensible "remove and store" type.

"Mac?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry, Chris. Thanks for the warning. I gotta make some phone calls. 'Scuse me."

She grabbed my arm and forced me to look at her.

"What can I do to help?"

"There's not much to do, 'cept get Tom to move me out tonight. The houseboat is pretty much rigged for water travel. With the tides bein' so unpredictable an' all since last spring, I redesigned the place so's there's nuthin' stored between floor level and one foot high. If the water gets higher than that, then it's a case of goodbye house, 'cause the pumps can't cope with that much water."

She looked at me for a minute or two, then nodded and collected her coat and bag.

"I'll catch up with you with the test results. Bye, Mac."

"Bye, Chris, and thanks."

"My pleasure."

And then she was gone, and I got things moving. I was no longer tired. I grabbed the phone and dialed Pete's number.

"Pete? Yeah. I'm okay. I'm going to get Tom to start moving the houseboat tonight. Yes, tonight. The sooner I move, the further away I'll be from the storm when it hits. No. I'll be fine. The interior is pretty much secured from the last time I was flooded. Thanks for organizing the lock-up gear for me. Yeah, I'll probably crash tomorrow. Yes, I'll take care of myself. I don't know where the safe berth is; I've got to find that out from Tom. When I know, I'll leave you a message. I'll be on the mobile from now on. Yes, mother, I'll be careful disconnecting the power. Bye Pete. Take care."

What can I say? The man worries about me more than a mother does. It's nice to know someone cares about me, now that all of my family's gone. I dialed once more.

"Hi, Tom, it's Mac. Yeah, I just heard. I've been sick. No, not yet, but the storm isn't going to wait for me to get better is it? Where can I moor? **WHAT!!?** There's nothin' safer closer, I take it? Yeah, next time I'll listen to the weather reports. There any crews on standby? There are? You're great, Tom. Thanks for looking out for me. I'll stay on board to make sure everything's okay. I'm just about to break out the radio. Usual wavelength? Right. Bye."

I put the phone down and headed outside to where the power board was, threw the switches, disconnected everything, stored it in the waterproof box on the side expressly used for that and then began to secure the outside furniture. Wonderful stuff, plastics. Doesn't weigh much, doesn't rust and is eminently waterproof. Once that was lashed to the decking, I wheeled the potted palm inside and put it into a big canvas bag to stop the soil from flinging itself everywhere, and then I lashed it to the spiral staircase. That took care of the outside. The barbecue was still in storage so I didn't have to worry about that. The inside gear I could take care of once the boat was under tug. Most of the gear was locked down anyway because we'd been having trouble with some kids who thought it was a huge joke to let loose the mooring ropes of all the boats in the marina. They'd been caught and were now spending every weekend working on an old tug that was to be restored to working order before their time was their own again. I checked that the pontoons were in place and inflated while I filled the water tanks and made sure that the chemical toilet was functional and then sat down to wait for the tug and looked at the night sky. The smell of ozone

was sharper. You could smell the coming storm. I drew in deep lungfuls of air and heard the approaching boat long before she hove into view, the arc light swinging round to blind me. I raised my arm to shield my eyes and waited.

"Ho, MacGyver! You've left it a bit late ain'tcha?"

I recognized that voice.

"Hi, Dan. Been sick. Didn't hear the warnings."

"And none of them Sunday sailors thought to look out for a mate, huh!"

Dan didn't think a lot of my current neighbors. They were mostly fair weather sailors who cared more about the paintwork than about the boat's capabilities, and it offended his sensibilities.

"Line coming over!"

I stayed still and sure enough, the thick line thudded to the decking at my feet. I grabbed it and attached it to the towing bar, and stood back as a second line landed inches from the first. Dan believes in safety first, second and third. He always uses three towing lines.

"Line coming over!"

The last rope thudded to the deck, and as I tied it in position, I heard the outboard motor. Dan would be coming over to check that I'd tied the lines properly. I didn't mind him checking my handiwork; after all it was his skin if the boat broke loose and sunk. Many of my neighbors saw it as an insult to their intelligence and treated him poorly. Funny how my transit bills were a third of theirs, and nothing of mine was ever so much as bumped. Dan took care of those people who treated him like a human being. The outboard motor died as it glided alongside. Dan tied it in position.

"Permission to come aboard, MacGyver."

"Permission granted, Dan."

Another little courtesy that rude people didn't get from Dan.

He always reminded me of a caricature of a sailor I'd seem drawn as a child in one of my annuals.

He had a wiry, skinny body not more than five foot seven, with sinewy arms and legs. His face was covered in a fine salt and pepper full beard. He said it helped to keep him warm in winter and the biting insects at bay in summer. Personally, I think it was the foul, reeking cigars he smoked endlessly in the summer months that did that, but there you are. His face was lined and weather beaten, like old leather. Another legacy of being out in all the weathers on the sea. His ice blue eyes missed nothing.

"You're lookin' right peaky."

"Thanks, Dan."

"Well, bein' sick hasn't stopped you doin' the ropes right. Good job. We'll start soon as I get back aboard the *Beachcomber*. You want one of the lads to help ya?"

"Thanks, Dan, but I'll be okay. If I need help, I'll call on the radio."

"Fair 'nuff. We've two ocean refills scheduled so the next stop'll be your new berth. See ya in port, MacGyver."

And with that he was gone. I headed back inside once the tug's engines started up, waiting through the first slap of rope being played out and then the initial jerk forward that meant the houseboat was moving.

I spent the next hour checking that everything was secured, after I'd mopped up the grape juice and broken glass. I'd forgotten all about the glass on the table.

The movement of the boat increased as we hit open sea. I dug out my wet weather gear, climbed into it, set the pumps on automatic and headed upstairs with the phone as the "chop" caused by my "sailing brick," as Dan called the houseboat, began to send water across the floor. I knew there'd be no water damage because I'd had the whole thing stripped, sanded, re-caulked and sealed after the last lot of flooding. I rang Pete's number to let him know my new arrangements, and then settled back on the bed to play my guitar.

The clock radio woke me at dawn, and I headed downstairs to see how things were. There was some water sloshing across the decking, but other than that everything seemed fine. The short wave radio crackled into life. Dan was checking up.

"Charlie Bravo Mike three zero five calling Alpha Delta five niner zero, come in."

"Alpha Delta five niner zero. Reading you loud and clear, Charlie Bravo Mike three zero five."

"How are things your end, MacGyver?"

"Fine, Dan. A bit of wash across the deck but that's all."

"Want to come across for breakfast?"

The mere mention of food had me dry retching.

"No thanks, Dan. The last thing I want to do is give this to you or your crew. I'd best keep contact to a minimum. Thanks for the invite. Maybe next time."

"Wish all my customers were as considerate as you. You know where we are if you need help. You holler, you hear?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Charlie Bravo Mike three zero five out."

I headed for the couch as sleep dragged at me again and allowed the wave motion to help me slide into slumber.

And so the pattern was set. Dan'd check up on me, and I'd spend my days sleeping and playing the guitar and talking on the short wave at night. I still couldn't face food, and I was managing to keep down less and less of the grape juice I liked so much. That worried me. Chris worried me too. She'd take one look at me once I reached port and slap me in hospital. I found it hard to settle in one place for a given length of time, but put that down to the fact that I hate to be idle, and

the changes in my housing arrangements were forcing me to be sedentary. Either that or the radical change in my sleeping habits was affecting me more than I cared to examine.

The new berth was quiet; my neighbors were away on holidays in Bermuda. I gathered from what Terry, the night watchman, said, that I wouldn't see them much. They only used the yacht during the summer. The berth on my starboard side was used by a charter service. It would be back 'round fall, so I had a lot of time to myself. Pete rang and arranged to visit. I was sure to get a nagging about how I looked.

I woke up with a start. Pete was staring down at me and frowning.

"What?"

"You're very pale, Mac, and thinner too."

"Yeah, well, the flu'll do that to a person."

"Are you getting enough sleep?"

"Yes. You want a coffee?"

He nodded, and I headed towards the kitchen area. I don't drink the stuff myself, but Pete can't survive without his daily dose.

"Chris asked how you are."

I nodded and went on organizing the water.

"So, what do I tell her?"

"That I'm getting better."

"I don't lie to my friends, Mac."

I sighed and rested my hands on the kitchen sink.

"Then ask her to recommend someone for me."

"I already have."

"And?"

"And she said she'd get back to me once she'd had the chance to do some checking."

It seemed my life was going to be organized whether I wanted it to be or not. I set the kettle to boil and was glad that Pete liked his coffee black. I hadn't been shopping, and the milkman hadn't begun deliveries to me yet. I puttered about getting the mug and stuff. The rapid boil cycle on the pot is great if you want coffee in a hurry. I did. With a caffeine "hit," Pete just might mellow out. Yeah, right. I began to pour the water. The mug slipped and boiling water cascaded over my hand.

I dropped the mug, and it clattered into the sink.

"Yeeow!"

I spun the cold-water faucet on and shoved my hand under it, hissing as the abused skin radiated pain. Pete came running.

"What's wrong?"

"I spilt hot water on my hand."

"Let me see."

So I held out my hand. It was fine. No blister, just faintly red, and that was fading fast. I was spooked. Thirty seconds ago there was a blister and now? Nothing!

"Good thing you got it under the cold water so fast."

"Yeah."

"You go sit down. I'll make my own coffee. You want a drink?"

I shook my head. I was becoming seriously concerned about my state of mind. I'd been having nightmares, which were becoming more and more graphic, and they all seemed to be about the same thing. Blood. And now I was seeing and feeling hallucinations. Oh, boy!

Pete finished clattering in the kitchen area and came to sit on the couch.

"And the test results?"

"Yes, you have a virus, and no, they've never seen anything like it before."

"Great! Now what?"

"You rest some more and work at getting better. Speaking of which, you should be drinking more fluids. I'll get you a juice."

I really didn't want a juice, but there's no stopping Pete once he's in full "mother hen" mode.

"Whatever."

He came back with a glass of tomato juice. Nice red color! I shook myself and put the glass down on the table. I didn't want it. Couldn't stomach it, literally. Whatever I'd eaten or drunk yesterday and today hadn't stayed long, and I was getting sore abdominal muscles. Hopefully, it would pass before anyone else, namely Pete or Chris, noticed and slung me in hospital. He was staring at me, and I could read the concern in his eyes.

"What?"

He shook his head and sipped at his coffee.

"C'mon, Pete. This is Mac talkin'. Spill it."

He looked at his coffee.

"Chris wants you in hospital for observation."

I stood up and crossed the room to stand near the door. Yeah, I know, my flight response from mankind's dim and distant past was working overtime.

"No way!"

I reached for my coat, and he was standing in my way.

"Outta my way, Pete."

"Uh huh. Chris is right, Mac. You're nothing but skin and bones. Have you looked in a mirror lately?"

I shook my head and eased into the jacket. There was no way that I was going to the hospital. They'd have to knock me out to get me there.

"I know you don't like hospitals...."

"You got that right!"

"But they have all the equipment –"

"No!"

"But Mac –"

"No, Pete. I'm stayin' here."

His eyes were a scant few inches from mine, and as I looked into them they seemed to glaze over, and he relaxed, and nodded.

"You're staying here."

"That's right."

I moved to get my keys, and he stayed where he was, unmoving. I looked back, and he blinked, then rubbed the side of his head and smiled at me.

"Must be all those long hours I'm still working. I've forgotten what we were talking about."

That was fine with me. I had no intention of bringing the subject up again.

"You going out?"

He frowned and cast round for his coat. I nodded.

"I though a walk in the fresh air might help."

"Want some company?"

"I'd like that."

A shrill beeping noise cut through the air. He grimaced.

"Damn!"

"I'll walk you to your car."

"Thanks, Mac."

"No problem."

We headed out into the crisp night air, and I pulled the collar of my jacket up higher and stuffed my hands into the pockets. We walked back along the moorings and up onto the wharf. Pete's car was parked under the lights at the entrance. I watched him drive off and then began to walk towards the watchman's cabin.

A noise to the right attracted my attention, and I peered down between the rows of buildings. I could see three figures struggling at the door to an old warehouse. My interest piqued, I crept towards them, picking out snatches of conversation.

" I told you to use more chloroform. Now the bloody kid's awake."

"Won't make any difference."

"Ouch! You little bastard!"

"What's the matter now?"

"He bit me."

"You can take it out of his hide later."

"Oh, I'll enjoy that."

They carried their struggling bundle into the warehouse and shut the door. I crept up close and listened at the door.

"That's the last one. Right you strip 'em, and I'll get the incinerator stoked up."

I heard the clink of metal and turned round to find myself ringed by three men. They were all dressed in dark suits, ranging in age from fifty to seventy. The one in the center held a gun.

"I think we've caught a police informer, don't you gentlemen?"

The other two nodded.

"Going to stop us having a bit of fun."

"Shoot him and be done with it. I'm eager to taste the delights that have been procured for our pleasure while we're on our 'fishing trip.'"

"Why not. Just one more corpse for the police to find, eh, John?"

They all laughed, and then I felt this burning in my chest, and my legs went rubbery, and I blacked out.

I felt the chill of concrete under my right cheek and stayed unmoving as voices and other noises carried to me.

"I've put the tub of chum at the stern, so when you've finished with your 'toys,' heave the stuff over the side and wait about fifteen minutes, then toss one of the kids in. The struggles should bring the sharks, and they'll get rid of your evidence for you."

"Thank you, Terence. Just another group of state wards unhappy with their lot in life, who ran away. Ungrateful little bastards after all we've done for them, eh, Charles? Once you've cleaned up here, join us at the rendezvous, Terence. There'll be plenty of work for your strong right arm. I've a notion to watch one being flogged while I'm being entertained. One of the girls, I think. That pretty little blonde thing will do nicely while I taste that fine lad on the end."

"Watch him. He bites."

"Does he now? Put him in the helmet."

Some scuffling ensued and a choked off cry, and then laughter.

"That will do nicely. You won't bite anyone now, my pretty."

"What about this?"

A heavy boot nudged me.

"The incinerator will get rid of the body."

Body? Hey, I'm alive!

"Right. I'll see you on the *Tiernan* in a couple of hours, Sir. I want to make sure there's no evidence left."

"I know I can trust you, Terence. Load the cargo while we have a drink."

"Yes, Sir. Hey! Len, give us a hand with this lot."

Movement, lots of it, so I stayed still and waited.

Twenty minutes later, I heard a powerful boat engine start up and risked turning my head to look. No one there. I sat up slowly, and my head pounded. I had one salacious headache. I looked down. There was some blood on my shirt, but I wasn't hurting. I'd look at the wound later. First, I had to deal with Terence and Len, and then I'd do something about the other three slime-balls. I staggered to my feet and drew in a deep breath and looked around. There was some fishing gear in one corner. Another corner held fuel drums, and another, chemicals. I stumbled over to the fishing gear and hunted through it. I pulled a reel of fishing line from it and spent some time making a

trip wire at each doorway. I couldn't be sure which of the two doors those rats would use, so I had to booby-trap both. I was hauling a couple of empty drums into position when I heard the pitter-patter of size twelve feet returning. I tied the load off and raced back to where I'd been left and lay down. Not a moment too soon. Thugs Inc. were back.

The door opened, and Terence's dulcet tones carried quite clearly.

"The furnace is hot enough, I tell ya. Now help me carry the SOB."

He stepped into the trap, and as he turned to look at his partner, he was jerked off his feet. The counter weights knocked the other guy unconscious. I got to my feet and strolled over to them. Yep! The one on the floor was out cold, while Terence struggled and cursed as he spun in the net. Now to find a phone. I stepped up to Terence and tapped him on the shoulder. He spun round, went pale and promptly fainted. Well, I guess I'll have to find that phone all on my own. I had a look round and found a wall unit. I lifted the handset and dialed Pete's number.

"Thornton."

"Pete. It's Mac. I need some help."

"What's wrong?"

"I've stumbled onto a pedophile ring."

"Where?"

"Here at the harbor. The three concerned are on a boat called the *Tiernan* somewhere off the coast. I've got the procurers all packaged and ready for collection. I could do with some heavy help. I'm pretty sure the kids have all been kidnapped, and from what I overheard, once they've been abused, they'll be fed to the sharks. One guy was talking about raping one kid while he watched another one flogged."

"I'm on it. I'll talk to the locals and the RCMP. Stay put, I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Will do."

I hung up and walked back towards Terence and Len, grabbing a roll of duct tape that someone had conveniently left lying around. I immobilized Len. He was bleeding from a head wound. I could smell the blood. All of a sudden, I was ravenous. I shook my head and looked down at my shirt at the hole over my heart. I lifted the shirt and swallowed. There was a healing wound. It was red and felt mildly tender to the touch. I shook my head. I dragged my shirt and jacket over my head. Yep! There was an exit wound too. The holes confirmed it. So, why wasn't I dead? I sure as hell should have been. I shrugged my shoulders, loosening the tension in them and decided to worry about it later. I knew I couldn't let anyone see me in this state, or there would be some very awkward questions that I couldn't even begin to answer, so I did a quick check of my two prisoners and had a look round. I found the furnace and threw the shirt and jacket into it, glad of the momentary warmth. Sheesh, I hated losing that shirt and jacket, but they posed more problems than I wanted to deal with at the moment. Now all I had to do was find a replacement and wait for the cavalry.

Five hours later, Pete and I walked out of police headquarters with the grateful thanks of relieved

law enforcement officers, welfare officers and parents. It seemed that I had chanced on a group of nasties that the police had been after for some time. I was tired and feeling light-headed. Pete kept yawning.

"Come on, Mac, I'll give you a lift home."

"Thanks, Pete. I'd appreciate that. You look beat. Want me to drive?"

"Thanks, but I'll manage. By the way, what happened to the shirt and jacket you were wearing earlier?"

His eyes skimmed over the iridescent glow-in-the-dark green "X-Files" plastered all over the front of the black tee shirt I was now wearing, and winced.

Pete often says all my taste is in my mouth. I shrugged. What could I say? The truth? Not in this lifetime!

"I don't know. I was a little too busy avoiding the incinerator to worry about what happened to my shirt and jacket. I found this in one of the lockers at the boat shed."

Leave it alone, Pete. I can't explain what's happened lucidly enough for myself, let alone for anyone else. Just let it alone. The car keys dropped from his fingers, and he stood there, silent and still. His eyes locked with mine, unblinking. I swallowed and broke eye contact. He blinked, swayed and looked at his empty hand, and then noticed the keys on the ground. He frowned, shook his head and rubbed his forehead.

"I must be more tired than I thought. I don't remember dropping the car keys. Maybe you should drive, Mac."

I nodded and bent down and picked up the keys and got into the car.

"Where to, Pete?"

He looked at me, a puzzled frown creasing his forehead, and then shook his head and sighed.

"I have no idea. Whatever I was thinking about has gone clean out of my head. Good work on those lowlifes. Can you believe it? A judge, a social worker and the supervisor of children's services all conniving to run such an abomination. Death's too good for them."

He shook his head again.

"What is this world coming to, Mac, when we treat our children this way? Just thinking about the things they had planned makes me feel sick."

I nodded in full agreement. He wasn't the only one either. I'd never seen such ice-cold rage from hardened police officers as I'd seen on the faces of those who'd been on the boat. I just hoped the judge who'd be listening to the charges would decide that these three sickos needed to stay in custody until their trial. I guess I'd have to leave that up to due process and hope that this was one of those times that the law worked the way it should. I leaned forward and started the car. I had a lot to think about as I drove Pete home. I was still thinking as I caught a taxi back to the houseboat.

I woke to see Chris's face. She was frowning, and her blue eyes were filled with concern. I smiled and moved to sit up.

"Hi, Chris. What'ya doing here?"

"Thinking of putting you in hospital, Mac. You're nothing but skin and bones!"

I swung up from the couch in a hurry.

"No, way! I am not going to hospital! And that's final! Good-bye, Doctor Butcher. You can find your own way out!"

She moved back away from me and bit her bottom lip. I could almost hear her marshalling all her neat little arguments about why I should be a nice co-operative patient and go along with her plans. Not this time!

"Mac?"

I shook my head.

"No hospitals. I'll die first."

"That's not funny, Mac."

"About as funny as your idea of putting me in hospital."

She sighed the sigh of one greatly put upon and put her hands on her hips, trying with body language to gain the upper hand. I've played those games too. They bore me. She smiled, that special coquettish wheedling one that she perfected during her modeling years, and tossed her head. I was unimpressed, and stayed unmoving.

"Mac..."

"Forget it, Chris. I've known you too long for those tricks to work with me."

She sighed and sat down on the end of the couch.

"Oh, well, it was worth a try."

She glanced at me and pouted.

"You weren't fooled for a minute were you?"

I shook my head. She straightened up and bit her bottom lip again. She was plotting. That little quirk of hers gives her away every time. It's like Jack's eye that twitches every time he's being real careless with the truth. She walked to her medical case, and I moved closer to the door.

"I need some more blood samples, Mac. We've a few more tests to do."

I shook my head.

"No way, Chris."

"Mac, I'm trying to help you."

"I know, but I'm not feeling co-operative."

She looked at me, red spots of anger flaring across her high cheekbones, her blue eyes narrowed and flinty. I'd forgotten how impressive she looked when thwarted. My mind raced, thinking of ways to divert her, and I discarded them as I thought of them. Too many of them would result in me losing Chris as a friend, and since I didn't have too many left alive, I didn't want to lose her. Neither did I intend to give in to her and give her the impression that she could mold me anyway, anytime she wanted. She'd once said that it was my inner strength that she loved. She couldn't manipulate me, and she respected that. If I gave into her now, she would lose that respect, and I'd be on the way to losing a friendship I valued. I drew in a deep breath. Here went everything.

"In fact, I'm feeling down right stir crazy. I've been cooped up in here for too long. I'm going on a camping trip. You wanna come?"

Her eyes widened, and she sat, suddenly, like a puppet with its strings cut. She looked at me and shook her head.

"The man is mad. He's got the flu, but does he want to do the sensible thing and rest? Oh, no, not him. He wants to go gadding about the countryside hiking. And not only that, he wants me, the original allergic-to-the-countryside-kid, to go along with him. I don't believe this."

Hmm! My diversion doesn't seem to be working the way I thought it would. Oops! I drew in a deep breath and played my last card.

"How about a deal, Chris?"

She looked at me, no doubt wondering what hair brained idea I'd come up with, and whether she could get me committed for insanity.

"A deal?"

"Yup. If I'm not better within five days, you can sling me in the hospital and do all the tests you want to. I'll even come quietly, doctor."

Her beautiful blue eyes were swimming with concern, and all for little ol' me. I tried to diffuse the raw emotions she was radiating. I couldn't let her get as close to me as she wanted. No woman was ever going to get close to me again. Those that did ended up dead, just like Mike, and I couldn't handle any more grief like that. Every so often, the memory of Mike seared across my heart, and I'm a coward. I've taken all that kind of sorrow I'm willing to shoulder in this lifetime. She came over to me and trailed one hand down my face.

"You could be..."

"Dead?"

She nodded, and the tears spilled over. This was no act, this was for real, and I gathered her to me and rocked her, just like I did the time she'd lost her baby sister.

"I can't... lo... se... you... Mac.... You... re... too im... impor... tant... to... me...."

The words were coming out between sobs. My eyes moistened, and I swallowed the lump in my throat. I drew in a deep breath and rubbed her back. I knew what was behind this. Caroline had been a model too, just beginning her career as Chris's was winding down, and she'd worked too hard and too long without proper rest and food, and she'd caught a respiratory infection. One of the many doing the rounds. Chris had wanted her to go to a hospital, but Caroline disliked them almost as much as I do, and she refused. Chris had a couple of lectures that day, and when she got back, determined to send her younger sister to the hospital, she found her on the cold marble-tiled floor, unconscious. She'd called an ambulance and done all the right things, but to no avail, and Caroline had died in her arms while they waited for the paramedics. Chris, of course, blamed herself, but the autopsy revealed that Caroline had an aneurysm, and it was only a matter of time before it burst. There had been nothing anyone could have done, but Chris still believed that, because she was a med student, she should have been able to do something. I knew exactly how she felt.... I couldn't stop Mike's climbing harness from snapping, but an irrational part of me kept screaming that I could have done something. When I was down, the demon still rode me and replayed the whole ghastly scene in slow motion. I guess it would be the same for Chris. We both had monkeys riding our backs.

Eventually, Chris quieted, and the hiccupping sobs subsided, and she drew back, her eyelashes all spiky with tears, her eyes swollen and red.

"Sorry 'bout that, Mac."

"'Sokay. I have bad days too. I'm sorry for upsetting you, but I'm not Caroline."

The air whooshed out of her lungs, and she paled and would have collapsed if I hadn't held onto her. I guided her to the couch, and she sat with her hands writhing and twisting on her lap.

Eventually she looked up.

"You know me very well don't you, Mac?"

I nodded, shrugged my shoulders and risked a tentative smile, and sat down beside her. She rubbed her eyes and looked at me, and drew in a deep shuddery breath, before nodding.

"On one condition."

"And that is?"

"That you take an emergency beacon with you."

I nodded.

"No problem. I have one permanently in with my gear nowadays."

A brief flash of pain raced through her eyes, and she nodded.

"Loss makes you more determined that it's never going to happen to anyone else you know, doesn't it?"

I nodded. She drew in a deep breath and rubbed the palms of her hands down her skirt, before pushing herself to her feet. She looked down at me and reached out a shaky hand to push a wayward lock of hair off my face.

"You take care of yourself, Mac."

"I always do, Chris. It's other people I have trouble keeping alive."

She shook her head at my bitter tones.

"Let it go, Mac."

"I will if you will."

She nodded and collected her bag.

"I'll be back in five days."

I stood up, crossed to her and gave her a quick hug.

Left alone, I grabbed my readied backpack and checked to see if it was all in order. I added a few things and then gave Pete a call.

"Pete? Yeah, it's me. I'm going away for a few days.... Yes, I checked with my doctor.... Chris isn't real happy, but we've agreed that I have five days of freedom left to get better before she slings me in a hospital and does her best to cure me. I thought I might see if the cabin is free... It is. Great. I'll head on up there now... No time like the present... I'm a big boy now, Pete. I'm not afraid of the dark... Yes, mother, I'll be careful. Yes, I have the emergency beacon, and yes, I've checked and tested the batteries.... See you in a few days, Pete. Bye."

And with that, I cut the connection and grabbed up the backpack and headed to my jeep. The restlessness that had been niggling at me for the last couple of days abated a little now that I was moving.

A quick stop at the gate, and Greg, the marina manager, agreed to arrange the hold on my mail for me, and I was on my way.

I reached the cabin as dawn began to run its fingers through the tops of the pine trees. I was tired. I pulled the backpack free and headed for the cabin. The key was where Pete said it would be, under the third rock that constituted a step up to the porch. The hiding place for the key is rotated through a dozen or so places in a random order. I could have searched them all if necessary. I was glad it wasn't necessary. The door opened easily under my touch, and I dumped the backpack on the over stuffed armchair to my left and closed the door. I grabbed the checked curtains that framed the two windows on either side of the door and closed them. No direct sunlight penetrated the cabin, but I had no intention of suffering a monumental headache because of bright light.

That done, I dragged my bedroll from the backpack and decided to catch up on some shut-eye. Sorting out the cabin, getting food in, I shuddered at the mere thought of it, and stocking up the woodpile could wait. I dragged the dust cover off the double bed, unrolled my bedding and literally fell onto it. Maybe this hadn't been one of my better ideas. Well, I could sort that out in the evening. If I needed to, I could use the emergency beacon. That settled, I turned on my side and drifted towards slumber, lulled by the sound of the wind conversing with the pine trees.

I rolled over and lay on my back, puzzling over what had woken me. The call of an owl sounded again, and I realized that was what I had heard. I sat up, stretched and walked across to the curtained window nearest to me and tweaked it back. The sun was setting, the golden rays almost gone; dusk stealing stealthily over the ground. I had a few hours of useable light left. The folk of the night were stirring as the daytime shift scurried for shelter. I opened the door and stepped out onto the porch, breathing in the pine scented air. The birds in the trees were squabbling over perches. Suddenly, a gunshot rang out. The birds flew up startled, and I jumped three feet in the air. Someone, or a few someones were hunting, out of season. I turned and ran into the cabin and reached for the radio. As I turned it on, four more shots rang out. They were closer. I grabbed the microphone and thumbed the button as I turned the dial to the frequency of the RCMP.

"Phoenix Foundation cabin, Hickleback Hill calling RCMP station Mike Alpha Tango three, do you read me?"

"Phoenix Foundation cabin, this is Mike Alpha Tango three, how can I assist?"

"I'd like to report high caliber rifle fire in the vicinity."

I flinched as more shots rang out. Closer this time.

"I hear it, Phoenix Foundation cabin. Dispatching patrol now. Suggest you find some cover, and lie low. Mike Alpha Tango three out."

I had every intention of finding a bolthole. I grabbed my jacket and headed for the door. Too late. It crashed open, and a high-powered rifle centered on my chest. I stood still.

"Hey Stu, lookie what I found."

A second man stepped up beside the other, his gun lined up on me as well. They shared a quick look and grinned. The one referred to as Stu stepped forward a pace.

"Hands on your head, and move out onto the porch."

I did as I was told. I felt the barrel of the rifle between my shoulder blades and watched as the other one approached me to frisk me. He grabbed my jacket and flung it to one side. He smelt of stale whisky, sweat and blood. His hands skimmed over my body. He shook his head.

"No weapons."

"Good. Listen up, boy."

They both chuckled at such wit. Physically, they might be men; mentally, well I've seen more intelligence in an ice cube. Some people think because they have a gun that it makes them important. All it does is make them dangerous. I waited. Eventually, they'd get over the witticism. Stu recovered first.

"You know, Paulie, I don't think he likes us. What do you think?"

Think? If their brains were gunpowder, there wouldn't be enough to blow their noses.

"I think you're right. What we gunna do about it, Stu?"

"This, for starters."

The butt of the rifle caught me in the solar plexus, and I dropped, gasping for air. As I lay there trying to soothe cramping muscles to relax enough to take in air, Stu stood over me, the rifle barrel pressed hard against my breastbone.

"Me 'n Paulie were out huntin', but we ain't killed anything worthwhile yet. That's about to change. We're gunna hunt you. You got two minutes head start before we come after ya."

He shoved me with his boot, and I went rolling down the steps, landing with a bone-jarring thump on the ground at the bottom of them. I lay there, stunned and concentrated on breathing.

"Get moving target, or are ya gunna lie there and let me hurt you real bad before I finish you off?"

A bullet kicked up stone chips that cut my face, and I decided that I'd better move. They watched intently as I clambered to my feet, and another bullet kicked up dirt near my left foot.

"Two minutes and counting, boy. Paulie, get the night goggles. We're gunna have fun!"

I backed up a little, and they just stood and watched me back into the undergrowth. Night goggles! That meant they had a distinct advantage unless I could blind them. I began my cautious way towards the jeep. I always kept emergency road flares there. They'd generate enough white light to blind these two if I could get to them. I kept easing my way towards the vehicle as "Paulie" went to fetch the equipment.

"An' bring back that unopened bottle, ya hear."

"I hear ya."

Maybe I'd end up with more than two minutes head start if they began to drink. I sure hoped so. I kept easing round to the jeep and flattened to the ground as I heard footsteps nearby. The unmistakable stench of urine assaulted my nose and continued for several minutes. Then the feet retreated, and I continued on my way just as the yellow liquid reached my former hiding place. I breathed a sigh of relief.

I finally reached the jeep and slowly raised myself off the ground and reached for the door. I eased the handle down and cringed as the lock released. It sounded like another gunshot to me with my heightened senses, but Paulie's noisy return masked it from Stu. I opened the door and reached in for the flares. My fingertips encountered them, and I grabbed hold and eased back. I listened and could hear the two as they downed the whisky. Time to go.

Five minutes into the woodland, I found the latest of their victims. A squirrel had been shot. The high-powered weapons the idiots were using had torn it apart. I crept on, knowing I had to draw them into the woods and then separate them. With any luck, they'd shoot each other. I moved on as the light faded, my eyes adjusting to the rising darkness. My senses were heightened. The rustle of small animals disturbed by this incursion, the scents of the night blooming plants, and the resin from the pines, coupled with the cool breeze sliding over my skin, comforted me, and I set about hunting the dangerous loons who were tracking me. I stopped and listened. Something threshed in the bushes ahead. I approached cautiously, and a fawn blundered into my arms. It trembled, and I steadied it. My hands came away bloody. It collapsed at my feet, tremors racking its body. I knelt, mesmerized by the dark swathe on my hands. My heartbeat accelerated, and I breathed in deeply. Saliva filled my mouth. I felt my canines lengthening. My tongue rasped over them, and I reached for the dying fawn. I soothed it, and its tremors slowly eased as I looked into the soft brown eyes. I scooped it up and bent towards the slender throat exposed by the drooping, too

heavy head and felt the fine hairs beneath my lips. Then I shuddered and bit down hard. The fawn twitched and slowly became limp as I sucked down the rich liquid that flowed down my throat and filled me with warmth. It satisfied me as no other food had since... since... Europe. I placed the dead fawn on the ground as memories came flooding back.

"Come walk with me."

I did. I walked beside him, and he drew me closer, an arm around my waist. He shouldn't do that. I should stop him, but... his eyes... so dark... so brown...

I felt the pine needles beneath my shoulders as I lay back. He followed me down and covered my body with his. He rested his full weight on me, and I felt the hard column of flesh pressing against me. NO! His long fingers traced over my face, and he smiled.

"Relax, my pretty. Relax."

I did. No choice in the matter.

"You are so beautiful, my golden lion. I shall treasure you. Keep you safe. No mistakes this time."

He drew back and knelt above me, his long fingers opening each button on my shirt, laying me bare. His eyes glowed golden, and he licked his lips, his tongue rasping over his fangs, and then bent to the fastening on my jeans. I struggled to move, but he looked at me, and I was drowning in his eyes again. Part of me was a gibbering wreck in the corner of my mind, busily denying what was going to happen. A vampire. One of the undead, complete with fangs! He was about to kill me! But he leaned down and licked my left nipple. I flinched and gasped. He raised his head and began to place feather-light kisses all over my face and down my neck, 'til he got to the pulse point on my neck where he rested his mouth and traced the huge vein with his tongue. I shuddered, and he pulled back.

"Oh, no, my lovely lion. Not yet. Be still and enjoy this, my gift to you."

His tongue began to slide over my ribs and nipples as he caressed my skin, skimming maddeningly over the highly sensitized areas, straying lower and lower, 'til his hand grazed my penis and my heartbeat leapt. He began to fondle my growing organ, grasping it firmly and stroking from root to tip. Tiny frissons of pleasure arced through me, and my breathing accelerated. He continued to stroke me, and as sensations built, licked his way across my ribs, and up, caressing each nipple as he urged me closer and closer to orgasm. My breathing shortened as climax came closer, and he neared the pulse point in my neck, slowly lowering himself on top of me, rubbing our groins together. He turned my head, exposing my neck, and began to lick. I felt the rasp of his canines on me and then pressure, and as he bit down, I exploded into orgasm. My climax lingered for such a long time, and then my world faded to black.

I awoke suddenly, lurching against the arms that held me. They tightened, and then his face swam into view.

"Did you enjoy our lovemaking, my lovely lion? I took such a lot from you, my pretty, you will feel quite ill for a few days. But such a short time, my lovely. We will have forever together. You will be mine and mine alone."

NO! Don't I have any say in this? Please?

He rubbed his jaw along mine and then licked my lips.

"Come, taste the sweetness of your blood. It is the elixir of life. You will come to worship it as you worship me."

He bent down and kissed my lips, forcing his tongue into my mouth. The flat, metallic taste of blood filled my mouth, and I whimpered. I didn't want to be like him, killing others so that I might live.

He misread my terror for desire and shook his head.

"Not yet, my strong lion. The change will come slowly. I should have taken less from you, but I could not deny myself the richness of your lifeblood. I give you these orders. You will obey. I am your master and you will obey me!"

His eyes glowed red, and his demands beat at me.

"I will not lose you as I have the others. You will accept the changes as they come, and you will NOT question them. You will find logical reasons for the changes occurring in you, and they will not frighten you. You will accept them. You will not fear them. You will remember NOTHING until the changes are wrought, and you have stepped over the line from mortal to immortal. The first time you drink blood all this will come back to you, and you will await me eagerly. You will accept me as your master, and you will obey my commands. You will not fear what you have become. You will accept it and me. We will go back to the good Father's house now. Forget tonight, forget everything until you cross over...."

I knelt in the bracken and grass as huge shudders racked me. I looked down at the body of the fawn. I had drunk its blood! Dear God, what had I become? I shook my head. NO! I would not be like that! The compulsion beat at me. Blood! I needed more. I shook my head, denying the urge as it built. I grabbed a handful of bracken to wipe my bloody hands, wishing for some water to wash my mouth out with as I rubbed the blood from my lips as best I could. The snick of a safety catch being released sounded nearby and then the sickening voice of the one called Stu.

"Oh, lookit that, Paulie. We did kill us a deer. Only a bubby one. An' here's our hornless goat a cryin' over the dead 'un. Think we should put him outta his misery?"

"Uh, huh."

They settled their rifles and aimed at me, and I smiled. As much as I hated these two senseless killers, they would stop me from being a murderer. I stood up slowly and turned to face them, my arms by my side, and waited. Stu slowly lowered his gun, puzzlement etched on his face.

"Aintcha gunna beg us not to kill ya?"

I shook my head. He shrugged and raised the rifle once more, and pulled the trigger. The bullet tore through my upper arm and spun me around. Pain lanced through me, and I held my throbbing right arm, biting my bottom lip to stop crying out with the agony each tiny movement caused. I didn't want to die piecemeal, but I did want to die.

"Gunna shoot bits of ya, 'til you beg us to kill ya."

I turned back to face him, and at the next crack of a rifle, I braced for the pain, but there was none. Stu slowly toppled forward, his rifle dropping from nerveless hands. Paulie spun round try-

ing to locate where the round had come from. A disembodied voice rang out, and I cursed his arrival as much as I had longed for it such a short lifetime ago.

"RCMP. Lower your weapon or be fired upon. Lower your weapon!"

Paulie sighted on me.

"If'n you do manage to shoot me, Redcoat, you'll end up with one dead civilian, 'cause the last thing I'll ever do is make sure I pull this trigger. Now, you listen to me. Throw down your weapon, and get your sorry ass out here where I can practice my target shooting before I get to three, or you're gunna have some serious explainin' to do about how you let a civilian get shot fulla holes."

While I was quite willing and desirous of death, I was not about to take one of the good guys with me, so I began to walk towards Paulie. His eyes bugged out, and as he pulled the trigger, I dropped. I felt the round tear a chunk of muscle as it scored my left bicep. Another rifle crack, and Paulie dropped to the ground, unmoving. Silence for a second or two, and then footsteps off to the right. I sat up slowly. I HATE guns! The footsteps came closer, and an officer in the RCMP stepped into the clearing, his rifle trained on the two erstwhile hunters. He continued to keep them in his sights as he toed them with his boot, but they lolled in the loose sprawl the newly dead have. When he was sure that they were dead, he crossed to me and squatted down beside me.

"Lie still, Sir, while I check out your injuries."

He reached down to check my shoulder and sat back on his heels. His face a blank mask. He checked the other wound site and blinked his eyes a couple of times before standing up.

"I've a first aid kit back at the vehicle, Sir. If you'd care to come with me."

I nodded. I was sure I wouldn't need it by the time we reached his vehicle, but I'd figure out what to do then. I stood up and followed the officer to his four-wheel drive. He stowed the weapon he was carrying in the rack in the back of the vehicle and locked it home before dragging the first aid kit free and turning to me.

"If you care to take off your shirt, Sir, I'll take a look at your wounds."

"The name's MacGyver, but my friends call me Mac. I think you classify as a friend, Constable... uh...?"

"Fraser, Sir."

"...seein' as how you saved my life back there. Wouldn't you agree?"

"If you say so, Sir."

He reached for a sterile dressing, and I caught his hand, forcing him to look at me.

"I'm sorry you had to kill those men, but they gave you no choice."

"If you say so, Sir."

"Yes, I do say so. And so will my statement."

He drew in a deep breath, sighed, and nodded before looking at me again.

"Thank you."

I nodded and leaned back against the side of the vehicle. It wasn't his fault I was still alive. He'd done what he considered his duty in protecting me. I doubt protecting monsters comes under the heading of duty, but then I wasn't wearing a big sign that said MONSTER – please exterminate! I looked down as he cleaned the injury to my right shoulder. It was healing, fast! Fortunately for me, he seemed preoccupied and took little notice of the state of the wound. Phew! He moved on to the bullet crease on my bicep and soon had that covered too. While he packed up the first aid kit, I let the memories released by the death of the fawn replay. I'd die before I drank human blood. Just how I'd achieve that, I'd figure out later. I couldn't very well go up to Pete and say, "Oh by the way, Pete ol' buddy, I'm a vampire and to live I need to drink blood. I don't like the thought of doin' that, so would you ram a stake through my heart, chop off my head and fill the mouth with garlic?" Ugghhh! That's assuming that Bram Stoker got it right in the first place! I looked up at the constable to see him waiting patiently. Obviously, I'd missed something here.

"Sorry. I was miles away. Would you mind repeating..."

"Not at all. Would you wait here until the sergeant arrives? I radioed them while you were thinking."

"Sure."

"The medical examiner will be here also, if you want him to treat your wounds properly."

I shook my head.

"I'm fine. You did a good job."

The briefest of practiced smiles, and he lowered his head to stare at the ground. He didn't believe me but was far too polite to say so. One thing you can't fault a Canadian on is their manners. Such courteous people.

Three hours later, the mountainside returned to quiet. Gone were the bodies, not only human, but also animal and bird too. Seems the two shooters had shot at anything that moved. Doug Slater the local owl specialist, his dog, Pat, three squirrels, a hawk, another fawn and three does had bled to death as they tried to escape. I was the only one who survived the onslaught, and I didn't want to live. Ironic, huh?

I trudged back up the steps of the cabin and groaned. Pete was sitting on the front porch.

"Now is that any way to greet a friend?"

"Sorry, Pete. It's been a long night, and I'm tired."

Not true, but hey, I'm new at this vampire stuff and fresh out of witticisms.

"I know. I heard all about it."

My blank look prodded him into further speech. He had the good grace to look a little abashed.

"Sergeant Andrews phoned me."

"And why would he do that, Pete?"

"Because I am the contact person for the anything to do with the cabin."

"And?"

"And?"

He tried for nonchalance and failed. We've known each other too long.

"And I asked him to keep an eye on the place and you because you hadn't been feeling all that well."

"Thanks."

He looked a little surprised. He'd expected me to grumble. I was past caring. What I'd remembered had kinda put that sorta stuff in the "trivial" bag.

I moved up to sit along side him, and he indicated my torn and bloodstained shirt.

"What happened to you?"

I opted for the truth. It was not one of my better choices, but I had rather a lot on my mind at that point in time.

"I got shot."

"WHAT! What are we doing here then? Let's get going. You need a hospital. Chris is going to kill me. She thinks you're having a quiet time here in the hills. Wait 'til she finds out. Boy oh boy, is she gonna chew me up and spit me out in little pieces."

He stood up and was halfway down the stairs before he noticed that I hadn't moved.

I just sat there and shook my head. Dumb move, MacGyver! Now he'll worry it to death like a terrier with a rat.

"Pete."

He didn't take any notice, so I tried again.

"PETE!"

"Huh, what?"

"I'm okay."

"Oh, sure."

He indicated the bloodstained shirt that was less pristine than it had been four to five hours ago. This condition of mine sure was playing havoc with my wardrobe.

"The blood's not mine. Well, most of it anyhow."

That got his attention.

"Whose is it?"

"A fawn they'd shot. It died in my arms."

Well, that was true enough.

"And the rest?"

"Mine. But the wounds are superficial. The RCMP constable's treated them already. I'm fine."

"Let me be the judge of that."

I knew where this discussion was headed, and I knew it was not a smart thing to do, but I went ahead and did it anyway.

"Okay."

I stood up and headed into the cabin. The place stank of whisky, so I opened the windows and left the door wide open. Fresh air would clear it out. Pete switched on a light and pulled out a cane chair from the table setting. I took the hint and sat down. I could do this one of two ways. I could make him forget, or I could tell him the whole story an ... and he'd have me committed so fast my head would spin. I drew in a deep breath as he checked the shoulder wound. I didn't need his look of utter disbelief to tell me that it had healed up. I just knew it had. The crease across the bicep was no more than a thin pink line. He sat down, his hands dangling loosely by his sides. He began to speak but nothing came out, so he swallowed and tried again.

"You're all healed. There's a small pink scar, but that's all. I don't understand, Mac."

That makes two of us. Oh, well, funny farm, here I come.

"Well, it's like this, Pete."

I drew in a deep breath.

"I'm a vampire. I heal real fast. That's the up side. The down side is that I can only drink blood. Nothing else stays down."

He glared at me.

"That's not funny, MacGyver!"

"I agree, Pete. But it's the truth."

And I let my head drop onto my chest and concentrated on my fangs. I felt them extend, then raised my head and looked at Pete. He fainted. Great! Now what?

Ten minutes later, Pete stirred and sat up with a gasp. I'd retracted the hardware and was sitting waiting for his reaction. It wasn't promising. I've seen fear on Peter Thornton's face before. We've

both been in situations where we thought we were gonna die, but this was the first time that the fear was because of me, because of what I had become. I tried swallowing the hurt that rose to choke me, but it kept on rising. Tears filled my eyes, so I closed them. If Pete wanted to go, I was not going to stop him. And to tell the truth, I didn't want to see the loathing that was sure to be there either. I wanted to remember Pete as a friend. I could hear his ragged breathing; hell, if I listened hard enough, I could even hear his heart beat. I stayed where I was. Any move on my part was sure to panic him, and I desperately wanted him to stay. The silence stretched, and then stretched some more. I heard the chair creak as he stood up. Bye, Pete. Thanks for being my friend. I stayed where I was as he walked across the floor and out the door.

As he went down the steps, I opened my eyes and brushed the tears away, sniffed and drew in a deep breath, let it out and then drew in another. I had a lot of ground to cover in what was left of tonight. There were a few things I'd regret not getting from the houseboat, like my guitar, but nothing that was irreplaceable. I stood up and crossed to the bed and rolled the sleeping bag up and tied it to the top of my backpack. I dug out the emergency beacon and put it on the table. I wouldn't be needing it anymore. I grabbed my jacket, shrugged into it, pulled the copy of the survey map of the area from off the bench top where it was kept and swung the backpack onto my back, buckled the straps and gave the cabin a final look over. I'd leave the key where I'd found it. I'd burn away the pain by hiking long and hard away from here, running like the wounded animal I was. I knew enough to survive in the wilderness areas. I'd just have to be careful not to leave any tracks the RCMP could follow. How Pete chose to explain me or what had happened to me was up to him. I strode out of the cabin, pulled the door closed and looked at the key. There was rain coming. I could smell it. I walked down the steps and put the key away in its hidey-hole and headed across the clearing.

His voice surprised me. I guess I'd been so caught up in my own misery that I hadn't heard him.

"Mac?"

I stopped where I was but didn't turn to face him.

"Mac, I'm sorry..."

"Me, too."

And I started walking again.

"Mac, please... wait."

I waited.

"Can... can we sit and talk about this?"

"What's to talk about, Pete? I'm a monster who used to be..."

I couldn't finish the sentence, and my vision became blurry with unshed tears. I shook my head and swallowed the lump in my throat. I drew in a deep breath and managed a shaky laugh.

"It's a great night for a hike. Take care of yourself."

And with that I strode away into the dark, ignoring his calls for me to come back.

The funny thing about running away from your own personal monsters and fears is that you never

do get to leave them behind. You always manage to take them with you. I knew I'd deliberately set out to test the friendship between Pete 'n me, and part of me was glad it had failed the test, because monsters don't deserve friends, and I certainly filled that category didn't I?

I awoke two days later at sunset to find Pete staring at me. Oh, great! Now hallucinations went with this condition! Or maybe it had been all the blood I'd drunk last night. The two deer didn't seem any the worse off for my "withdrawal," and I'd watched over them to make sure they were okay before I'd moved on to find a sheltered spot somewhere out of the coming sunlight.

"Hi."

I didn't say anything. What's the point of talking to figments of the imagination? They only say what you want them to say. I guess it was my mind's way of telling me that I'd miss our friendship. Heck. I already knew that.

"Mac, please. We have to talk."

I closed my eyes to think about the route I would take tonight. I wasn't hungry, so I wouldn't need to follow the deer. Hopefully, when I opened my eyes this apparition would be gone.

I did and he wasn't. I sat up and proceeded to break camp. I was rolling up my bedroll when Pete spoke again.

"Can we just sit for a while? I've been following you for two days, and I'm not as young or as fit as I used to be."

I strapped the gear to my backpack and hoisted it onto my back and turned to look back over my shoulder. Then it struck me. Pete was wearing a suit the last time I'd seen him, and now he was wearing his "wilderness gear," as he called it. If he was a memory, then he'd still be wearing the suit I'd last seen him in. I sat down suddenly.

"It really is you? I'm not going nuts?"

He nodded and then shook his head.

"Oh, man. And here I was thinking I'd done a real good job of losing myself."

"You did. If it hadn't been for the tracking device I put in your backpack, I'd never have found you."

"You 'bugged' my gear? Why?"

He nodded and flushed red about the cheeks.

"You weren't well, and I..."

"Didn't trust me to take care of myself?"

"No... Yes... I mean I was worried about you..."

"And?"

"And we have a few things to sort out."

I nodded and scuffed the ground with my foot. Pete coughed and cleared his throat.

"What do you want to know, Pete?"

"Are you really... a..."

"A vampire?"

He nodded and swallowed.

"Well, I have the teeth for it."

I thought about my fangs, and they dropped down, and I smiled at him, giving him the full effect. His eyes widened, but he didn't bolt.

"And any food, other than blood that I ingest, comes straight back up again."

I'd tried some experimenting with wild food, and all I'd gotten was a set of sore stomach muscles. I ached inside for all the things Harry'd taught me in good faith which were useless to me now. Another chunk of *me* that I'd lost. Somehow, immortality didn't measure up against the losses I'd racked up during the last few days. I shrugged and continued cataloging the changes.

"I don't tolerate sunlight too well. I mean, I get one salacious headache if I don't wear sunglasses during the daylight hours. I also burn in direct sunlight."

I'd found that one out the hard way. Got caught in a patch of sunlight and sizzled like a burger on a grill 'til I'd got into the shade. Fifteen minutes later, nothing to show for it except the memory.

And while I still didn't want to live, I didn't want to die in that much agony either. I know the

nerve endings are dead after two minutes, but the brain remembers the pain and so does the body, and, basically, I'm a coward. If I had a choice about it, death I mean, fire was not my first choice!

"My senses are heightened. The night is as clear as daylight to me."

"How...?"

"How did this change happen?"

He nodded.

"I got bitten by a vampire when I was in Romania. A Count Grigor. I was looking at the stars, and he began talking, and the next thing I know he's..."

"Why didn't you tell me about this before?"

"Oh, right. Hey Pete, guess what? A vampire bit me! When I did tell you, look what happened. Besides, he made me forget what he'd done to me. Told me I wasn't to remember anything of what had happened until the change was complete, and I'd tasted blood for the first time. It all

came back to me after... well, it came back."

I looked at the ground and waited. Hey, according to the Count, I had forever. I shook myself. Didn't fancy spending the rest of eternity as his plaything. But I'd figure something out, good ol' resourceful MacGyver. Yeah, right!

"Mac?"

"Sorry, was miles away."

"Do you want to spend some time at the cabin?"

"I... need to be near a..."

I nearly choked on my next words, but I drew in a deep breath and got them out in a rushed mumble.

"A food source."

"A what? Mac, speak up."

So I did.

"A food source."

He gaped, and I could almost see the wheels turning as he figured out what I meant.

"I won't drink human blood. The thought of doing that... I know that's what folklore says vampires do, but I won't! I'm doing okay on animal blood. I just don't fancy rat's blood, and that's all there'd be at the docks. Up here, I can find a deer when the hunger hits."

"You get some warning?"

"Don't you?"

He nodded. Then he moistened his lips with his tongue before speaking again.

"How often..."

He coughed and tried again.

"How often do you need to feed?"

"I'm pretty new at this, Pete."

"Every day?"

I shook my head.

"I, uh, 'dined' last night."

He paled at this, and I heard his heartbeat kick into overdrive.

"Both deer are fine and with their herd right now. I can show you if you like."

He went bright red and wouldn't look at me. I sighed. This was going to be rough on both of us 'til we'd worked out the parameters of our new relationship. I guess the old one died one night in a graveyard in Europe. What could I say to him? That I was the same ol' MacGyver he'd always known. We both knew that wasn't true anymore.

"You can walk away any time you like, Pete. I won't hold it against you..."

The hell I wouldn't! But I had to give him a way out if he wanted one. I owed him that much. He shook his head.

"I don't run out on my friends, Mac. You know that. Especially when they're in a tight spot."

"It's okay, Pete. I scare me, too."

He blinked and then flushed bright red.

"Oh. That obvious is it? Sorry. This is outside of my field of expertise."

I nodded.

"Me too."

He sighed and straightened up.

"How do you want to handle this...?"

"Condition?"

"Yes."

"I don't know, Pete. I can't very well go to the local library and do research on the topic can I? I mean I doubt there's a 'Book Of Etiquette for Vampires.'"

He just looked at me. I sighed.

"Sorry. I'm a little bit ticked off right now, and taking it out on you is wrong. It's just that..."

"I happen to be in the line of fire?"

I nodded and kicked at the ground again and turned away, a little ashamed at my behavior. He wasn't the person who'd caused all this, and I had no right to be "snippy," as Mom used to call it, at him.

"It's okay, Mac."

I whirled round.

"No! It's not OKAY. It will never be okay again!"

I fought for control. Being angry wouldn't solve anything. Pete stayed unmoving, only his eyes widened, and he went paler if that was at all possible. That stopped me. I needed somewhere to

redirect my anger. I kicked at a nearby fallen tree branch and watched it spin off into the night. My breath was ragged in my throat.

"Remind me never to make you angry."

Pete's awed tones made me turn round and face him again. His smile was a little weak.

"Does that happen all by itself, or do you have to *want* it to happen?"

When he realized I didn't know what he meant, he explained.

"Your eyes glow golden, and your voice changes, becomes more sibilant, and your teeth, um, *show*. Makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. From the look on your face, this is something new to add to your 'List Of Things I Can Do.' I'm sorry, I'm babbling aren't I?"

"'S'okay, Pete. You're allowed to babble. I'm not far off babbling myself."

Pete drew in a deep breath and crossed to me, so that we were standing close. I could smell the fear, and a cold hard ball formed in the pit of my stomach. I had caused this. It was a new and downright unpleasant sensation. I guessed I'd eventually get used to my friends reeking of fear every time I approached. Yeah, right!

"I want to help you, Mac, but I'm not sure how. Can we talk about it?"

I nodded.

"Sure."

"Promise?"

Damn! He knew me too well. I chewed my bottom lip and then shrugged. Sheesh! I had the time.

"Promise."

His face lit up with a smile. The first in a long time. It was then I noticed he had shoved his hands in his jacket pockets and realized he must be cold. I hadn't noticed it. Another *plus*, if you could call it that, of my condition? I hit the release on my pack and lowered it to the ground.

"I'll get a fire going. You're cold."

I sat well back from the blaze. Seems my *condition* had an inbuilt reaction to fire. Terror bubbled up every time I came close to it, but like my fear of heights, I wasn't going to let it beat me. Pete had noticed and had taken over the responsibility of feeding the flames from the pile of wood I'd collected, without saying anything.

The silence stretched between us as we were both lost in our own thoughts. I took over feeding the fire when Pete finally succumbed to sleep. I had lots of hard decisions to make, and I had to marshal my arguments because Pete wasn't going to let me go easily. I could just abandon everything and leave, but that, like using my powers of persuasion now that I knew I had them and it just wasn't dumb luck working for me, was taking unfair advantage of him, and he didn't deserve that. It would make my life a lot easier in one way, but it was not the way to deal with a friend. So, I stayed. My thoughts jumped from one idea to the next as I watched Pete sleep. I looked around. I could do worse than live here in the mountains. As long as my food source hung around I'd be

fine. Winter might prove to be interestin' but if the wild game proved too elusive I could always keep a few horses, and maybe go riding at night. A distant howl made me shiver. The last time I'd heard a wolf howl I'd been jumped by the local bloodsucker. Pete stirred. I put another piece of wood on the fire. Sparks glittered briefly and then fell. The howl sounded closer. Pete sat up.

"Was that a...?"

"Wolf? Yup."

"Only one?"

"So far."

He glared at me.

"That's not very comforting, MacGyver."

Oh, ho, full name. Pete's not happy.

Another howl, soon joined by a second.

"Doug came across a mated pair when he was checking his owls last month. He wrote and told me, wondered if I was interested in doin' a study on them."

"The Foundation would be happy to see the reestablishment of wolves up here."

"Don't think the deer or the local farmers would feel the same way, Pete."

And would it be the Foundation Pete, or would you 'sell' them the idea to give an old friend something useful to do?

"You could do a feasibility study, say, over a year and let us know whether we should keep the wolves here or put them in a captive breeding program for their own survival."

I nodded, it would be one way of giving something back to the community while I learned about the new me. I'd still have to leave the houseboat. Just thinking about it hurt! I liked living there, but weighed against drinking rat's blood... I shuddered. I could learn to like the cabin. I wouldn't need any of the kitchen stuff, except for visitors. If I had any visitors!

"So, Pete, you thinking of hiking back to the cabin in the morning?"

He looked at me plainly wondering where this conversation was headed.

"I thought about it. Why?"

"You be able to find your way in the daylight okay?"

"Well if I can't I'll just let you lead the..."

I was shaking my head.

"Uh,huh. I tend to go up in smoke in daylight. I can point you in the general direction but no more bright sunny days for me. If'n you want me to come with you it means traveling at night."

"Oh."

That kinda said it all.

Pete hunted round in his gear and finally brandished a torch.

"Ready to go when you are."

There really was no getting out of it. Pete meant to stay attached to me no matter what. I sighed and started smothering the campfire. Pete pushed himself up, stretched and then proceeded to help me make sure there was no life at all left in the fire. That done, he shouldered his pack and turned, waiting for me to finish buckling the straps on mine. He hefted the torch.

"You want this, to break trail?"

I shook my head.

"Nope. Don't need it. I can see just fine."

He nodded and waited until I checked my compass bearing and the map, and then followed. I like hiking. It's great, but I usually don't... er... didn't do it at night. I was seeing all sorts of critters that tend to hide from daylight. It was great. Pete stumbled along in my wake.

I looked round the houseboat, an ache, a sense of loss, beating at me. I liked living here, and I didn't want to leave. But since I refused to survive on a diet of rat's blood (ugh, I hate those fur balls!), then I had to move to a place where there was a food source I could stomach, and where there were less people to comment on my new habits. Until Pete and I sorted a few things out, that meant the cabin. So here I was surrounded by packing cases once more. A lot of the gear was going into storage for the time being. The movers were due tomorrow morning at seven, and I had time to do one last check. My backpack, guitar and sunglasses were on the couch. I headed upstairs and checked the cupboards there. They were empty. I knew they were, but I still went through the motions.

I jumped when a very human scream of pain sliced through the still night air and stood unmoving for a heartbeat or two, wondering where it came from. A second scream from outside had me racing down the stairs and to my front door. I peered round it and located the source of the noise.

A man leaned against a mooring bollard. I could see something silver dangling from one hand. A second man was pulling himself painfully closer to my door.

"Help me... help me... I command you..."

I froze. I recognized that voice. I began to shake. No! Not here, not now. I shook my head. There was no way I'd willingly do anything to help the thing that had shredded my life. The first figure staggered across the wharf, cross in one hand, wooden stake in the other towards the monster that crawled towards me.

"Back you spawn of the devil. This is one life you will not have!"

Count Grigor hissed and pulled back from the cross, his fangs fully extended, and then screamed

as the first figure thrust the cross against his chest. As he fell backwards, the first figure leapt towards him and swung downwards, and they grappled, grunting and crying out. One more almighty shove and they both collapsed. The top figure rolled limply to one side, and the Count twitched briefly, and then his head lolled to one side. I drew in several deep breaths and could finally get my arms and legs to do what I told them to - move! I pulled the mobile phone off the recharger by the door and raced across to the feebly moving man and gently eased him onto his back. The raw, pulsing wound, which had once been a human neck glistened wetly as blood gushed from it. I shoved the edges of the neck wound together and grabbed for the mobile phone. It was slippery and hard to get the emergency number dialed.

"I need paramedics and police at Seaside docks, wharf twelve, berth fifty two. The wooden houseboat. I've got one corpse and another man bleeding profusely from multiple wounds. I'm holding the edges of the carotid artery together. Hurry!"

I cut the connection and called the gate as I struggled to get free of my jacket so I could put it round him.

"Greg? That you? It's Mac. I've got a man bleeding to death on my front doorstep. I've called the paramedics and the police. Can you lead 'em in? Great."

The man stirred faintly, groaning, his breathing becoming more ragged.

"Hang in there. The paramedics are on the way. Keep still."

The pulse beat at me. I could feel it through my fingertips, and the cloying, sweet/salt/iron warmth made my mouth water. I felt the hunger rising in me, and the tips of my canines rasped over my tongue, and my pulse rate picked up. I began to shake as the need beat at me. Feed! Slake your thirst! The man stirred again, feebly and turned to look at me. Recognition killed all thoughts of blood and feeding, and I felt the canines retracting.

"Father Jansci!"

He tried to speak, and I placed my fingers over his lips.

"Shh! Hush! Help is on the way."

His head rolled to one side, and he began to cough. In between, he labored to speak.

Is... it... dead?"

I looked at the unmoving body slumped in a pathetic heap.

"I think so. There's no movement."

"Good."

I could hear the approaching sirens as Father Jansci began to shake. I didn't dare release my hold on the artery to wrap my jacket round him to try to keep what little warmth that remained in his body from seeping into the night's coolness. Car doors slamming and pounding feet heralded the approach of help. Torchlight bounced along the walkway. I called out.

"Over here. Hurry, please."

And then the lights they carried momentarily blinded me. I blinked and then could see two uniformed paramedics, drug case open and busily working to save a life. I kept my hold on the carotid artery while they worked at getting Father Jansci into pressure trousers, and a plasma drip set up. Then they turned their attention to his throat, gloved hands, clamps and bandaging ready.

"You can let go now. We'll take it from here."

I nodded and released cramping fingers and stood up. More footsteps approached as the paramedics continued to try and stabilize Father Jansci.

One of the approaching figures was tall, over six feet, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist and long legs. His blond curly hair, that like mine defied all attempts to keep it tidy, swirled in the evening breeze. His eyes were blue, and he was good looking in the classical sense. He walked with easy assurance of who he was.

His companion was shorter, maybe five foot ten or eleven, with heavy shoulders and a paunch to go with it. From the look of him, he enjoyed his food. He was mid-forties, balding, with a very cynical twist to his lips. I eavesdropped on their conversation.

"I'm tellin' ya, Nick, Myra is not going to be happy about us missing her fancy dinner."

"You'll just have to make it up to her somehow, Schanke."

"Oh, right! How do you suggest I go about achieving that miracle, Nick?"

"Tell her that you'll take her out to dinner tomorrow night at Michelle's."

"What! You gotta be kiddin'. I don't make enough in six months to be able to afford that classy place."

"My treat."

"Nick, I don't think..."

"I know, but humor me, Schanke. Trust me, she'll love it."

"Yes, but we'll have this case to work, and the captain is not going to be feeling generous."

"Yes, she will, especially when I tell her that it's your twenty-fifth wedding anniversary dinner."

"Oh man. I'm dead. Myra'll kill me for missing this one."

"No, she won't when you tell her you have reservations for Michelle's tomorrow night at eight. Nat's volunteered to sit for you, and I'll cover for you at work. Consider it our gift to you and Myra."

"Nick, I don't know what to say."

"Say thank you, Nick."

"Thank you, Nick."

"My pleasure. Now let's see what we have here."

The paramedics moved off with Father Jansci as the uniformed police officers began roping off the scene and looking at the body of Count Grigor. No one had approached me as yet, and I was content to watch while I fought down the hunger that began to beat at me again.

" Hi, Mary. What do we have?"

"One deceased male Caucasian of indeterminate age, Nick, Schanke."

"Manner of death?"

"Not sure what killed him, Nick. Coroner'll have to decide."

"No bullets, I take it?"

"It's weird, Schanke."

"Define weird, Mary."

" A wooden stake through the heart, garlic roped round the neck and in the mouth, several burn sites in the shape of a cross, four broken glass bottles tangled with the clothes, which from the burns, were probably filled with acid. I mean, what kind of killer are we dealing with here?"

"One who's been watching too many horror shows if you ask me. Anything else?"

The police officer nodded and held out a small, slim case.

"Just this."

The one called Nick opened it.

"Drug addict, maybe, Schanke?"

"I've never seen a needle filled with that kind of stuff before. Any idea who the owner is?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Witnesses?"

"Just one. He helped hold the guy's throat together 'til the paramedics got to him. Might have saved the guy's life."

"Anyone talked to him yet?"

"No."

"Okay, we'll take it from here. Thanks, Mary."

"I'll start the door knock, or is it boat knock?"

"Great, and see if we can get a bit more light here. I'm not real happy working in the dark."

"Sure, Schanke. I'll see what I can rustle up."

The officer walked off, and the two men confronted me.

"Hi. I'm Detective Knight, and this is Detective Schanke. Can you tell us what happened?"

I nodded.

"I can tell what I heard and saw. You mind if I get cleaned up, first?"

I held up my blood-covered hands, and felt the hairs on the back of my neck rise when the one called Detective Knight looked at me. His eyes seemed to shift color for a moment, and then they were blue again. I shook myself. I was seein' things again.

"Not at all Mr...?"

"MacGyver."

"As long as you don't mind us watching or taking blood samples."

"That's fine by me. Door's open. Can one of you get the handle for me? I don't want to..."

"Sure."

The one called Schanke held the door open for me, his eyes never leaving my hands. I looked at Detective Knight and held up my hands, nodding towards the sink. I saw his nostrils flare briefly before he nodded and turned away, scanning the room.

"Going somewhere, Mr. MacGyver?"

He indicated the litter of packing crates and cases.

"Yes. I'm moving up to a cabin in the mountains. The movers are due tomorrow."

Schanke smirked, came over to me and scraped a little of the blood off my hands into a plastic bag and then nodded at Knight.

"You mind if I have a look round upstairs?"

"Be my guest."

As he headed upstairs, I managed to get the taps turned on and began to rinse away Father Jansci's blood. Knight wandered round the room before leaning against the staircase. His partner came part way down the stairs, shook his head, and leaned against the staircase railings just above Knight's head.

"So, what can you tell me about the incident that happened right outside your door, Mr. MacGyver?"

Time to edit the truth. I'm not about to tell one of Canada's finest that I'm a vampire. He'll believe me, right? Oh, yeah, and he believes in the tooth fairy too! I took my time drying my hands, before turning round to face them both.

"I'm not sure that I can tell you much. I was upstairs checking that I'd emptied all the cabinets

when I heard a scream. I ran downstairs and looked out. There were two men fighting. By the time I got there, one was dead, and the other had his throat ripped open. I called the paramedics and the police and waited for them to arrive. The rest you know."

Detective Schanke came the rest of the way down the stairs and stood in front of me.

"You seem pretty cool about the whole thing, Mr. MacGyver. This kind of thing normal for you is it?"

I shook my head. Normal? This? It didn't used to be. I'm not so sure anymore.

"No, this kind of thing is not normal."

"What do you do for a living, Mr. MacGyver?"

"I work for The Phoenix Foundation."

"Doing what?"

"Lots of things."

"Like?"

"Like, ecological surveys, retrieving data, testing security systems. Peter Thornton's the director. You could get a more detailed list from him if you want."

And Pete sure as hell wouldn't tell them about the other stuff I'd done for the Foundation. Knight stood up and glanced at his watch.

"Thanks for your time, Mr. MacGyver. We'll be in contact."

I didn't doubt that for a minute! Just what I needed while I tried to come to grips with the changes in my life.

"Come down the precinct in the morning, and we'll have your statement ready for you to sign."

Morning! Sunlight! Uh oh! I swallowed and wiped suddenly sweaty hands down my trouser legs.

"Uh, could it wait 'til tomorrow evening?"

Think fast, MacGyver!

"I, uh, have a skin condition that makes me allergic to sunlight."

Spontaneously combusting qualifies as a serious skin condition, wouldn't you agree? Schanke looked at his partner and smiled.

"Sounds like you and Nick have something in common. You should get together sometime and swap stories."

What? Did I miss something here? Or have I just fallen into a very big pile of trouble? I must have looked puzzled. Hell, why not? I was. Schanke elaborated a little.

"Nick has the same problem – that's why he works permanent night shift."

I managed a less than enthusiastic smile. Right! I'd have to ring Pete fast and warn him of my "skin condition."

"I'll see you tomorrow night then, Detectives."

They headed towards the door, and I followed them and stood watching as they headed towards a group of people clustered round a body bag. I listened in.

"Hi, Nat."

"Hi, Nick, Schanke."

"So, what can you tell us about the John Doe, Nat?"

"Well, cause of death is due to heart failure. Someone shoved a wooden stake through it. The burns are consistent with acid. I'll know more once I get him on the table. The same goes for that syringe you found. If you're all finished here?"

Knight nodded.

"We'll meet you back at the lab after we go see the injured man. Take care, Nat."

"Always, Schanke. Nick, got a minute?"

"I'll wait for you in the car, Nick. And Nat?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for offering to sit for Myra an' me."

"You're welcome, Schanke."

They waited until he was out of earshot, and then she drew Knight to one side and began to talk in whispers. They were too far away for me to hear what they were saying. Now was a good time to ring Pete.

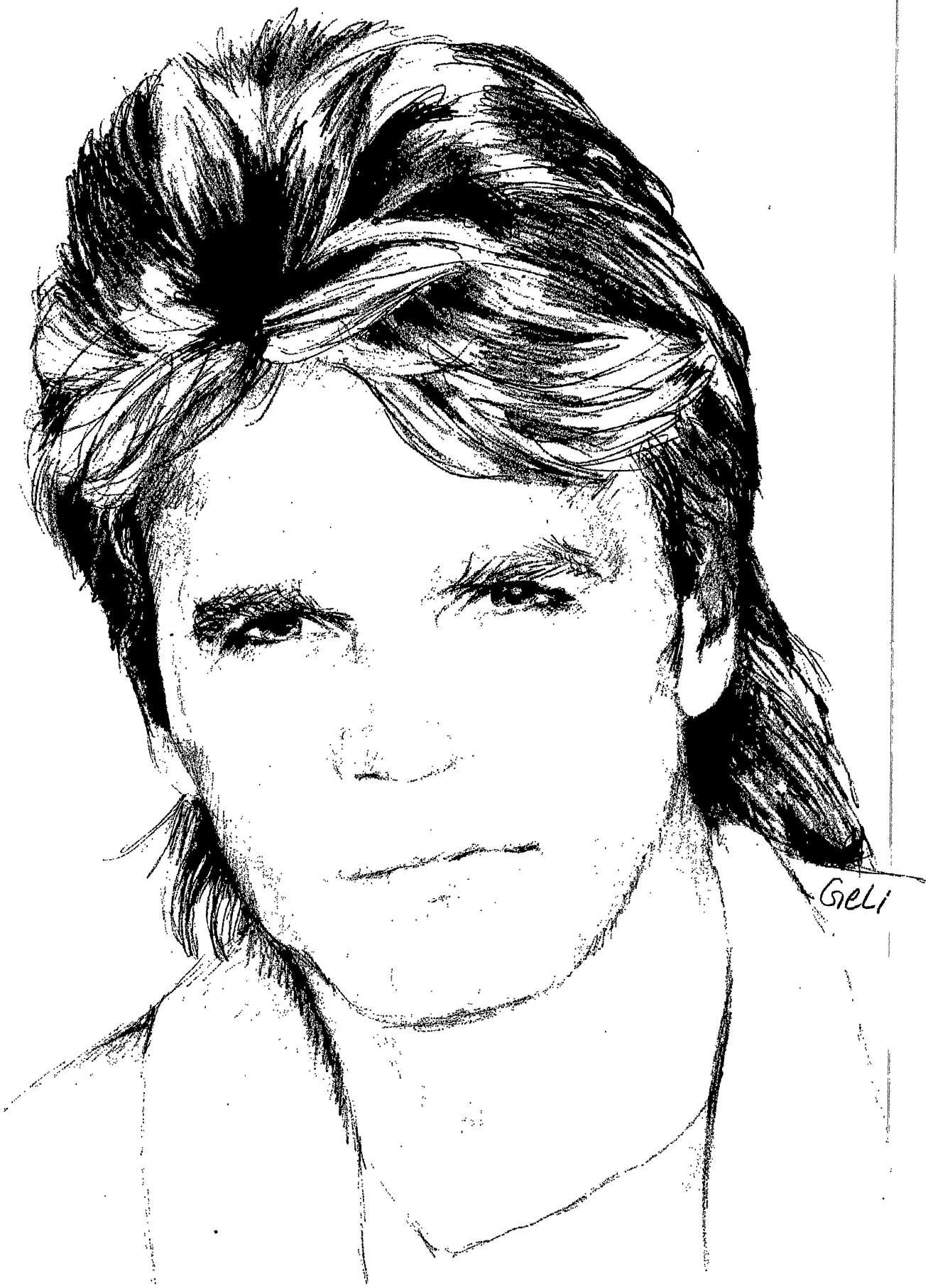
I looked up from strumming the guitar, and there was Detective Knight. The long, dark coat he wore was stark against the white of his shirt. It took me a few moments to register the fact that I hadn't seen or heard anything. How he'd just appeared was beyond me. I was still trying to figure it out when he spoke. His opening words rocked me.

"When were you 'brought over,' Mr. MacGyver?"

I inhaled sharply and put the guitar to one side.

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about, Detective."

There was a blur of movement, and he was beside me, his eyes golden, fangs extended. His grip on my upper arms was painful, and then I realized I was dangling about a foot off the floor. His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voice was a sibilant hiss that reverberated in my bones.

"You are one of us. Who brought you 'over?'"

Reckless stupidity is not usually one of my traits, but I'd had a rough night, what with one corpse and one near dead on my doorstep, and now a second vampire showing up. The neighborhood was getting quite crowded. I didn't give my brain a chance to get back in gear with my mouth, and I went into what Pete calls my vampire defense mode - all fangs and glowing eyes.

"None of your damn business. Now unless you intend to rip my throat out or shove a stake through my heart, put me down."

He lowered me slowly and then released me. I rubbed my arms. I'd have bruises soon, or then, maybe not, seeing how well I'd healed after I'd been shot. Knight stepped back a pace and retracted his hardware, and the glow in his eyes faded as he looked at me, and then he indicated the couch.

"We need to talk."

I nodded. The barest of smiles touched Knight's lips before he sat down. He repeated his question yet again, and this time I didn't even pretend to misunderstand him.

"Who brought you over?"

"The one with the stake in his heart."

"Did you kill him?"

I shook my head.

"No, but I'm glad he's dead."

A sudden thought made my stomach lurch.

"He ***is*** dead, isn't he?"

Knight nodded.

"But will he stay that way?"

Again Knight nodded.

"Oh, yes, we can be killed. I have some advice for you. You're new to this city, so here are the rules. **Don't ever** hurt a human. If you do I'll hunt you down or give you to The Enforcers..."

"Whoa! Stop right there, Detective. I don't hurt humans. I used to be one, so back off! Just who are The Enforcers that you spoke of? Can they help me?"

"Help you? They'll kill you if you break our code."

"Code? What code? Hey, help me out here. I have no idea of what you're talking about."

He stood up and began to pace the room as he spoke.

"How did the priest find you? Why were you living in the open? It only invites disaster. How did the count get caught? Why weren't you with him?"

He stopped pacing and waited for me to answer him. I ran my fingers through my hair, before I spoke.

"Your questions don't make a lot of sense."

He continued to stare at me, waiting for my answers.

"I've no idea how Father Jansci found me, or even why. The last time I saw him was just over two weeks ago when he let me sleep in his house while he was holding vigil. That's the same night I met the count, and he... he used his powers to... to..."

I drew in a steadying breath and continued.

"I guess the count was coming to claim what he thought was his property, me!"

I risked a glance at Knight. He was frowning.

"When did you first feed?"

"Four days ago."

"On what?"

"It's none of your business."

"It is if it was human."

"Hey! I won't drink human blood. I told you that."

"What was it?"

He held my eyes with his, and it was easier to answer the question than to fight it.

"A fawn's blood."

"You killed it?"

"It was dying. Some idiots were shooting anything that moved. It blundered into me, and... and before I knew it I was..."

"So your 'Master' is dead."

"If you mean Count Grigor, then I certainly hope so."

"Does the priest know what you are?"

I shook my head.

"Does anyone?"

I nodded.

"Who?"

"A friend."

"One you would trust with your life?"

"I have."

"This friend understands what you are?"

"Yes."

"Good. You will need a friend to survive."

"I don't think I want to, not like this."

Talk about spilling your guts. Well done, MacGyver, and to a perfect stranger too! He turned to look at me, his gaze assessing.

"You didn't ask to be brought over, did you?"

I shook my head.

"No. Didn't have any say at all. I'm still finding out what I can and can't do."

I rubbed my eyes.

"So, what happens now?"

He smiled and nodded as if coming to a decision.

"Now, you ring your friend and tell him that you'll be staying with me for a few days."

"What?"

"If you are going to survive, then you're going to need some help. Your 'Master,' the one who brings you over, teaches you what you need to know and looks after you, but since he is dead, you are 'fresh meat,' and as such, any vampire who finds you can, under our laws, claim you as his or her property, and treat you as they desire, unless you can beat them in a fight. And one as young as you wouldn't stand a chance. Now, I'm willing to play 'The Protector' for you, but it will mean some compromises on your part..."

"Now, just wait a minute. What do you mean compromises?"

He sighed and paced up and down again, his hands straying through his unruly hair, and I could see his shoulder muscles bunched with tension. The hairs on the back of my neck rose. I didn't like the way this was heading. He turned and looked at me.

"While I teach you how to move about in our society and put you in touch with others that can help you survive in the mortal world, you will need to act like my 'property.'"

"Now wait a minute..."

I definitely didn't like where this was heading. I stood up and moved away from him. The next thing I know, he's got me by the upper arms again, and I didn't even see him move, and I'm pushed up against the far wall, my arms pinned to my sides, and all my pushing and twisting is to no avail whatsoever. His face was scant millimeters from mine, his golden eyes and fangs all too evident.

"There are those older than I am who would welcome a youngling like you as their fodder. If you cannot defeat me, how would you resist them?"

I got the idea. I stopped struggling and relaxed in his grip.

"You can let me go. You made your point."

He released me, and as I stood there rubbing my arms, his eyes turned blue, and the fangs retracted, and he sighed.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For humiliating you that way, but I had to make you understand just how easy it would be for one of the others to take you and control you."

I drew in a deep breath.

"How do I know you won't?"

He looked at me and smiled, all teeth and menace.

"You don't. You'll just have to trust me."

That was honest enough.

"And why should I trust you, and not one of the others?"

He invaded my personal space again before answering.

"Because I give you my word that I won't hurt you."

"That's it?"

He nodded. An honorable vampire? Was there such a thing?

"Why?"

Knight didn't pretend to misunderstand the question. He stepped back and turned his back before answering.

"Because I owe a debt to humanity."

"But I'm not human anymore."

"True, but you were not given a choice."

"You were?"

He nodded.

"And I made the wrong choice, and now I have to live with the choice I made."

He shrugged his shoulders and turned to me.

"It's nearly dawn. What is your decision?"

I drew in a deep breath before answering.

"What are the ground rules?"

He smiled and nodded.

"I'll explain on the way. Bring what you need and let's go."

I grabbed my backpack, guitar and glasses and followed him out into what was left of the night. I looked around for a means of transport. There didn't seem to be any.

"Uh, how..."

"I left the car by the gate."

"What about your partner?"

I trailed him up the wharf.

"He's at the precinct, writing up the report from tonight."

He turned and smiled at me.

"In fact, he volunteered to do it."

Yeah, right, like Pete *volunteered* to forget about my change of clothing once before.

"I need to make a phone call from the gatehouse."

"You can do that from my place. We will just have time to get under cover as it is. Come on."

I shrugged and quickened my pace. We turned the corner, and I fell in love all over again. She was beautiful. A real classic.

"Wow!"

Knight stopped and turned, impatience written on his face.

"While it has the biggest trunk space of any car built in the last thirty years, it will not hold both of

us. You can admire it later. Get in the car, Mr. MacGyver."

"My friends call me Mac."

"Get in."

I put my stuff in the back seat and got in the car. Knight sure kept it in beautiful condition.

Half an hour later, as the sun's rays began to steal over the sidewalks and pavement, the Caddie pulled into a driveway, and a garage door began to slither upwards. Knight drove the car into the maw of the dark cavern beyond, and darkness settled as the metal sliding door rattled its way closed again. The parking area was cold concrete. No lights on here. Well, let's face it – neither of us needed them. Knight turned to me and smiled. Somehow, the childhood rhyme about the spider and the fly kept playing through my head.

"Bring your things and follow me."

He climbed out of the car, and I grabbed hold of my stuff and followed. We walked towards an elevator and rode it up one level. The door opened onto a huge open-planned area, complete with kitchen, entertainment center, a dining area, grand piano and fireplace. One part of the room looked like it held an artist's easel. The few ornaments were well chosen.

"Nice place."

"Thank you."

I jumped as Knight keyed a remote control, and a series of metal shutters slid down and completely shut out the approaching daylight. He reached out and took hold of my guitar. Reluctantly, I let it go, and he placed it on a convenient shelf.

"This way."

He turned and headed up the stairs to the second floor. I tripped up the first step, and after regaining my footing, I kept my eyes firmly on the next step, all the way to the top. He was waiting, and I could tell he was nervous about something.

"What?"

"Part of the charade starts here."

My mouth went dry.

"We will have to share sleeping arrangements."

"You mean we will have to sleep in the same bed?"

He nodded. Is that all? Here was I thinking I'd have to sleep in a coffin. Not my ideal of comfort. I guess I'd have to shed quite a few preconceptions gained from lurid reading matter and Hollywood movies. I've shared my sleeping arrangements with a variety of people before, and not all of them female, so sharing with a man again didn't faze me.

"Okay. Which side do you prefer?"

He blinked. I don't think he expected me to agree so easily.

"Uh, the left."

He opened the door and walked into a very large bedroom. The bed was more than adequate.

"Nice."

He smiled and proceeded to the walk-in wardrobe and began to make space for my gear.

"It's fortunate that we share similar taste in clothes."

"That's important?"

"Yes. It will make playing our roles that much easier."

"You mean..."

"That as your 'Protector' I could tell you what to wear among other things? Yes."

I stopped where I was and straightened. Other things! He and I were going to have a little chat!

"Whoa! We have some talking to do."

"We certainly do. When you've finished up here, come down, and we'll get started."

After having knocked the wind out of me with those few remarks, he left. I sat down on the bed. Maybe I had gotten into a little deep water here. I swallowed and had a sudden dizzy spell.

When my head stopped reeling, I went on mechanically sorting out my gear. I had to face facts. I was sadly uninformed about my new lifestyle, while Knight had all the information I'd need. I was at a severe disadvantage, and he'd offered to fill in the gaps. If I wanted the information, I had to play along with him. Fine! Decision made, I stowed the last of my gear and headed downstairs. He was seated on the couch. On the coffee table in front of him was a dark green wine bottle about half full and two full glasses.

As I approached, the aroma of blood filled my nostrils, and I reeled as hunger tore through me. Knight stood quickly and came to me, steadying me as he led me to the leather couch. He grasped a glass and handed it to me. I felt my canines protruding, and my salivary glands were working overtime. I gripped the crystal glass tightly, fearing I would break it, and shuddered. I had to know what blood this was.

"Wha... what... kind?"

"Aged steer's blood. You will **never** drink human blood in my home. That is a promise."

I brought the glass to my mouth and downed the contents in one gulp. After that I managed to loosen my hold on the glass. Knight immediately poured some more blood. I tried to be more restrained with this one, but failed miserably and downed it just as swiftly as the first.

All of a sudden, the tension inside me lessened and warmth sped through me, and I could place the glass on the table.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize..."

"There is no need to apologize, but try not to let your hunger become so great again, because you'll lose control and kill someone. Usually, a friend suffers when the bloodlust gets that strong, so if you want to keep your human friends alive, make sure you have fed before you see them."

"Lesson Number One, Detective?"

"My name is Nicolas, or Nick. And yes, lesson number one."

He poured some more blood into my glass and took hold of his glass and sipped from it. I tried to do the same and found that I could. Obviously, the ravening edge of my hunger had been blunted. Time to find out just how big a mess I'd gotten myself into.

"What does a 'Protector' do, Nick?"

"Exactly as the name implies. Teaches you, stops other Vampires from using you for their carnal pleasures and sport."

"And in return?"

"You do as he or she wants."

He held up his hand as I began to protest.

"I said I would 'play' the role, and that is exactly what I will do. You will have to put up with snide remarks about my tastes and me and possibly about your sexual preferences. I will have to be 'possessive' of my new 'toy,' you, and you will have to tolerate it in public, and do as I ask you without question. It is not going to be easy for either of us, but if you wish to succeed in this society, you will need to play along. I give you my solemn promise that I will never use my powers to take advantage of you. If you find the idea completely distasteful, I can probably arrange for you to go with a female friend of mine."

"No!"

The vehemence of my reply startled him. I shook my head. I owed him an explanation.

"Women I get involved with tend to end up hurt, maimed or dead. I don't want to risk the chance that your friend would end up that way because of me."

He smiled at that and sipped from his glass before speaking.

"Janette would be amused that you would care about her welfare so much, even though it is misplaced."

He looked at me as he spoke again.

"She is older than I. We share the same master."

I must have looked as alarmed as I felt, for he hurried on.

"LaCroix cannot take you from me. No one can. You are mine until I release you. There is a ritual that we must undertake before I leave for work tonight, an exchange of blood that seals the pact

between us, a necessary formality, for your safety and mine. If this is not done, then any vampire can challenge me, and if I lost, you would become their property. Something to be avoided at all costs, I assure you."

I had lots of questions.

"You must have lots of questions. Ask away. I'll answer."

"You reading my mind?"

He smiled and shook his head. He had a really nice smile.

"No, but I was a Youngling once."

"Um, how old..."

"I was brought across in the year 1228."

I did some computations. And gulped. I sipped from the glass while I tried to make sense of what I was hearing.

"And there are older vampires than you?"

"Yes."

"You spoke of a code earlier. What is it?"

"A charter, if you like, drawn up by the 'Old Ones' to ensure that we survive. The 'Old Ones' are exactly that. The most ancient of the vampires. 'The Enforcers' are from them. They kill vampires that attract undue attention to our kind, and humans that know about us and would expose us to the world. Your friend is safe as long as he or she does not try to tell the world of your existence."

"Reading my mind again, Nick?"

"No. I have a human friend, too, but in vampire society, humans are thought of as a food source or as a servant. To do the things we cannot do for ourselves, because of our limitations. As long as you are careful, you can have your human friendships, but in public you must never let it seem too important to you. Remember this! You will watch them grow old and die. Can you afford to let yourself get too involved?"

"And if the pain of this life gets too much?"

"You can attract the attention of The Enforcers, step into the sunlight, immolate yourself, or get someone to shove an ash stake through your heart. Those are your options, Mac."

Some options!

"Have you felt like...?"

"Yes, but I have learned that I owe a debt to humanity, and I must repay it before I can rest."

He smiled and finished his drink. There was a lot of pain in those few words.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to..."

I couldn't face him, and so concentrated on my drink. He reached out and touched my hand. I looked up and he was smiling.

"It's all right. Now, I need to sleep. Your choice. You can join me, or you can amuse yourself down here."

"I think I'll stay down here, if you don't mind."

He smiled and nodded.

"Why don't you ring your friend and tell him what has happened?"

I must have looked shocked because he elaborated.

"Tell him you've discovered an old friend, and you've decided to stay with him for a while."

"But he'll..."

"Of course, he will. But if it becomes necessary, I will pay him a visit and alter his memory a little, so that we all remain safe. We'll talk again, Mac."

And with that he headed upstairs. I looked at the phone and thought about what he'd said, then reached over and dialed Pete's number. This was going to be a very long phone call.

I awoke to see Nick standing beside me. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. I didn't remember falling asleep. I looked round for my guitar and saw it was back on the shelf that he had put it on earlier.

"It had slid onto the floor. I assumed you didn't want it left there."

"Uh, no. Thanks."

"Did you reach your friend?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"And he was all for coming over here to check you out. I managed to persuade him that I was a big boy now and able to take care of myself, and that I'd introduce you both to each other as soon as possible."

"And he was happy with that?"

"No, but he agreed to it."

I inhaled, and the scent of soap and cologne filled my nostrils, which reminded me that I hadn't showered.

"Do I have time to have a shower before we deal with the ritual you spoke about earlier?"

He nodded.

"Go ahead. I have some preparations to make."

It felt great to be in clean clothes, and I eased my favorite leather jacket over my shoulders as I came down the stairs. Nick was by the kitchen sink. He had the left sleeve of his shirt rolled up, and he followed my every move as I walked towards him. His smile was brief, and then he reached out and tugged at my jacket.

"You'll need to take this off and roll up your right shirt sleeve."

I did as he asked. He took a deep breath and looked at me.

"To seal this pact, I am going to feed from you, and then you will do the same from me. That way the others will leave you alone, and should they become bothersome, I will be able to tell you have need of my protection."

I shook my head.

"No. I won't drink human blood."

Nick's short, harsh bark of laughter startled me.

"You forget. I am not human."

And then I was looking at the golden eyes and fangs of a vampire. He took hold of my arm and waited. I drew in a deep breath and nodded, and then he lowered his head, and I felt the tips of the canines scrape over the skin and then pain as he sliced into the blood vessels there. He sucked and swallowed several times before he pulled back and licked my blood from his teeth. I looked at my arm. Already the blood was congealing, and the two puncture wounds were clean.

I'd had worse damage from Whylie's dog when I was eleven. He hadn't really meant to bite me; we'd just both gone for the same tennis ball. I'd needed four stitches at the time, and Whylie's Dad had been all ready to shoot Patches, 'til Mom spoke to him, and I'd explained what had happened. Funny how the weirdest things popped into your head in times of stress.

Nick was offering me his wrist and waiting. I swallowed and thought about the fangs and felt them lower. I bent forward and rested my mouth on his skin. Sensations flooded through me. I smelled the clean scent of him. His skin was so smooth and soft under my lips, and I could sense the blood pulsing beneath his skin. I bit down hard. I felt my mouth fill with richness. I swallowed once, twice, and wanted to continue feeding, but he pulled me back. I let go, reeling and would have fallen if he hadn't gathered me to him. My head was spinning, my heart pounding in my chest, and my fangs were still extended. He held me while I fought for control.

Eventually, I pulled back, and he let me go. The taste of him rolled round my mouth, and I looked at him and felt the first stab of shame. I had enjoyed what I'd done!

"Don't feel ashamed, Mac. It is called survival. Believe me, I would not have put you in such a position if it was not absolutely necessary."

I wished he'd stop reading my mind!

"But I... enjoyed... it!"

I could hear my shame and self-loathing in the words. Nick walked towards me, and I gave ground, spinning off from the cabinets I banged into and still retreating 'til I hit the back of the couch and lost my balance, falling backwards onto it. He was beside me in a minute, his eyes golden, his fangs extended, his voice echoing in my bones.

"Now you know why I do not drink human blood. It is too easy to forget."

And he reverted, no fangs, no golden eyes.

"The temptation is too great, isn't it, Mac?"

"Yes."

And I couldn't control the tears that filled my eyes. How was I ever going to control the beast inside?

"That's part of my job. To help you to learn control."

He took hold of my shoulders and gave me a little shake.

"You must have at least two glasses of blood each day for the next month, while your body stabilizes and becomes accustomed to the changes. That way, any friend who comes in contact with you will not do so at risk of life and limb. It will also allow you to control yourself in public. Because, believe me, it will smell like a smorgasbord out there among the humans."

He released me and sat back. I lay there drawing in huge shuddering gasps of air as realization suddenly struck me. No more close hugs with Penny or Jack or Pete! I could lose control and rip their throat out. Nick held out a glass of blood.

"Drink it, and then we have to get going."

I sat up, sniffed, wiped the tears away with the back of my hand and downed the glass in one gulp. It lacked the fire of Nick's blood, for which I was grateful. The sooner that taste was forgotten the better!

I read through my statement, and signed it. It looked so simple reduced to a page and a bit of typewritten wordage. I sat back and put the pen down. Detective Schanke was sitting on the edge of the desk observing me. It was supposed to make me nervous. If only he knew! He'd be the nervous one. I smiled.

"Care to share your thoughts, Mr. MacGyver?"

I shook my head. Nick came back as Schanke leaned forward and invaded my personal space.

"I think you know more than you're telling us, Mr. MacGyver."

"That so, Detective?"

"Yes."

"Schanke?"

"Yeah, Nick?"

"Nat wants to see us."

"Be right with you."

"And Mr. MacGyver, too. She said something about tissue samples."

"Your lucky day, Mr. MacGyver. You get to visit the bowels of the coroner's building. I'll let the captain know."

"Thanks, Schanke."

With that, Schanke got off the desk and headed towards an open doorway. I looked at Nick, and he shook his head slightly. I nodded and waited with him.

I don't like buildings that smell of death, and I can't understand people who voluntarily choose to work in them. They give me the creeps, but here I was following Nick and his partner into one. They pushed open a door and headed into an autopsy room. I took one look and did an about face.

"Whoa! I'm outta here!"

Nick grabbed me by my jacket and hauled me back in and spun me round to face the young woman from the crime scene.

"Natalie Lambert, I'd like to introduce Mr. MacGyver. He's here for tissue sampling, Natalie."

I raised a hand and made a halfhearted wave. The autopsy table was empty for the moment, and if they wanted me to stay, it had better remain that way.

"This won't take a moment, Mr. MacGyver. I need to do a tissue scrape and take a blood sample."

I hate needles! She turned back from the cluttered desk top with all the paraphernalia she needed, and I looked the other way. Schanke drew in a deep breath and headed for the door. Both Natalie and Nick smiled.

"What's wrong, Schanke?"

"The last time I hung around here while you were doing a tissue sample, I ended up being a pin cushion. I'm leaving. I'll see you later, partner, and you can give me the news that the good doctor has then."

And with that he was gone. Natalie and Nick smothered their laughter, before turning to me. I started to remove my jacket.

"You won't need to remove your jacket, Mr. MacGyver."

She tried to swallow the laughter in her voice, but part of it trickled through. I looked at Nick, and he nodded. I eased the jacket back on, and she took hold of my left hand, pricking me with one of those things they use in the blood bank. Oooops! There's something I'll need to attend to, getting myself removed from the donor database. Can't see me rocking up to the front desk and asking for a withdrawal somehow. She'd finished by the time I'd come back to the present. Nick drew in a deep breath and looked at me before turning to Natalie once more.

"What did you want to see us about, Nat?"

She looked at me and then at him before answering.

"Ah, don't you think..."

He shook his head and then looked at me expectantly.

"The corpse you were dealing with, Ms. Lambert –"

"Natalie."

The correction was automatic. Who am I to argue?

"Natalie... was Count Grigor. The man who murdered him, thankfully for me, was Father Jansci, a priest I met two weeks ago, when I was traveling through Romania."

"Now, just wait a minute..."

"Hear him out, Nat."

"The good father was trying to save me from a fate some of his parishioners had met. Unknown to him, he was too late. The count had already infected me."

She looked from Nick to me, and back again. Her mouth opened and closed, but no words came out.

"I... uh... 'changed,' if that's what you could call it, last week. I'm like Nick."

I looked away and shoved my hands in the pockets of my jacket. I was unprepared for her next words.

"Really? Can I... I mean... may I study your condition? I mean, if I can find out what causes the changes, then maybe I can reverse them."

I looked at Nick, but he was no help.

"It must be your decision, Mac."

Oh, fine!

"It won't involve needles will it?"

She blinked, and the look on her face meant needles – lots of them – in the not too distant future. She nodded.

"Sometimes."

"I'm not a real big fan of needles."

"Then I'll try to avoid them as much as I can."

I nodded.

"Okay."

Maybe I was grasping at straws, but I had the time to do it in. Natalie blinked and then smiled. It lit up her whole face.

"Right... I'll organize some stuff and then give you a call. Where can I reach you?"

I floundered for a second or two, and then Nick stepped in.

"At my place."

"Oh, fine."

"What about the corpse? Nat?"

"What? Oh, yes. Well, cause of death was heart failure as I said.... Funny thing, the stake was tipped with silver. The glass vials held water."

"Water?"

"Yes, Nick. Water."

"Holy Water, maybe?"

My suggestion got their attention. I shrugged my shoulders and added to my explanation. "Well, he was a priest. He'd have access to Holy Water, wouldn't he? And he probably heard all the stories about its affect on vampires that I have."

Natalie nodded. "Valid point Mr. MacGyver...."

"Mac, please."

"Mac. I'll get Grace to organize some samples from our local area and then compare it with the sample from the crime scene."

"What about the syringe, Nat?"

"Oh, that's a real gem, Nick. It contains silver nitrate. It'll kill you within seconds. Not just vampires, anybody. Nice little weapon. I have the good father's fingerprints all over the case and the syringe. I also have a partial match on the neck of the flask of Holy Water of Father Jansci's left thumb and forefinger. That coupled with a clear imprint of his little finger, right hand, on the stake, and he's your killer - or executioner - or whatever."

Nick nodded and stood up from where he'd perched on the desk.

"That ties the case up very neatly, thank you, Nat. The good father died this morning."

"So, case closed. The captain should be happy. Here's my report."

She handed over a slim manila folder. He nodded his thanks.

"She would be if we could solve the other five murder cases we're dealing with at the moment. I'll go give Schanke the good news. Catch you later, Nat. Mac?"

"Bye, Natalie."

"Mac."

And with those pleasantries, we parted company. I can't say I was sorry to leave. Nick had noticed.

"Problems?"

"I don't feel comfortable down there, that's all. It's the place, not the people."

He nodded.

"Once I've reported to the captain, I'll drop you off."

"I can get a cab."

He shook his head. "No."

I turned my head to glance at him.

"This part of...?"

"Yes."

I shrugged and stuffed my hands in the pockets of my jacket and followed him back upstairs. This Protector thing was beginning to irritate me already, even though I knew it was necessary.

Schanke hailed Nick the minute we entered the squad room.

"Nick? Janette rang. Wants you to pay her a visit tonight. Said it was urgent."

"Here's Nat's report."

"Oh, the captain wants us to turn Father Jansci's belongings over to a Monsignor Valdis. He'll be here in the next twenty minutes or so. You know, I'm not surprised they're sending such a high up personage. Did you see the size of the solid silver cross Father Jansci was carrying? It must be worth a small fortune."

Nick twitched, paled, swallowed, and looked around the room. I started to go closer to him to offer what meager support I could when he glanced at me and began heading out of the squad room as he was talking.

"I'll go see what Janette wants and drop Mr. MacGyver off while you deal with Monsignor Valdis. That way, we'll cover twice as much ground with half the effort."

Schanke looked up from Natalie's report and began to protest. He might as well have saved his breath. I could tell Nick wasn't going to stay around for anyone.

"Nick! Wait up! The Captain wants you to..."

Whatever else he was saying was lost as the door closed behind us. I looked at Nick as we strode along. I guess the stories about the effect of the cross weren't just stories. I'd ask him about it when he was a little calmer.

Nick drove fast and economically. I had no idea where we were going, but the fresh air blowing through the Caddie was a welcome change from the formaldehyde filled air of the coroner's building. Okay, I exaggerate. The smell was antiseptic and reminded me too much of hospitals. Hey, one up for vampires. I wouldn't need a hospital if I got hurt. I was really pleased with that thought. Nick slowed the Caddie and parked in front of a nightclub called "The Raven." Nightclubs aren't my scene. Too frenetic. I settled down to wait. Nick turned to me.

"There is someone you need to meet and many others who need to see you with me."

I grimaced, but nodded and clambered out of the car. Nick strode ahead and nodded to the door keep, who acknowledged his greeting with a wave of a hand and chose to ignore me as I tailed behind.

The cacophony of sound and cigarette smoke that assaulted me almost drove me straight back outside into the relatively clean air of the street. I coughed and spluttered and waved my hand ineffectually about my head, trying to dissipate the smog that threatened to overwhelm me. Nick smiled and leaned close to my ear and shouted above the din.

"You won't have to worry about dying from the results of passive smoking."

Terrific! Another on the plus side for us vampires! Wonderful! Why would anyone in his or her right mind choose to stay in this environment? I trailed behind Nick as he negotiated the steps and threaded his way towards the bar. He stopped in front of one of the most exquisite women I have seen in quite a while. She was sipping from a wine glass, and her dark eyes missed nothing. I stood just behind Nick and tried to place a faint odor that tantalized my taste buds. Blood! She was drinking blood mixed with wine! My heart rate jumped.

"Ah, Nicola, so nice to see you."

Her look was predatory, her dark eyes lingering on portions of my anatomy for far longer than I cared. I shifted closer to Nick.

"Who's your friend?"

I stayed silent and waited for Nick to speak. She glided closer, and Nick moved to intercept her. She stopped and frowned. Her head tilted to one side as she gazed at us. Nick lifted his arm and draped it across my shoulders.

"Janette, this is Mac. Mac, this is Janette, an old, old, and dear, friend."

Janette inclined her head, her eyes straying to the pleasant weight lying across my shoulders before focusing on Nick's face once more.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Nicola?"

The steel beneath her honeyed tones struck me. I straightened as knowledge of who she was registered. Nick saw that I had made the connection and, without breaking eye contact with her, nodded.

"A moment of your time, Janette, in a quiet place."

She frowned before turning to the bartender.

"Miklos."

He turned to her.

"Look after things for a while."

He nodded, and Janette led the way towards a curtained off area. She brushed aside the curtains, and Nick motioned me to precede him. As I entered, the noise level died a little. My eardrums thanked me. I waited to one side as Nick came to stand beside me. Janette moved closer, and he stepped between us again.

"Another of your human friends that needs a place to stay, Nicola?"

There was anger beneath her cultured tones. He shook his head.

"What then?"

"Mac. If you are ever in need of a friend or a hiding place, you can come to Janette, here at *The Raven*. She will help you out of love for me. Isn't that so, Janette?"

He stepped back then, and I could see that his news had surprised her. She looked from him to me and then back again. Her eyes widened, and her mouth opened as her hand came up to cover it.

"Are you mad, Nicola? If He finds out..."

"I don't care if he finds out. In fact I would like you to spread the word, discretely, that Mac is mine, and off limits to anyone else. And that includes you, my dear."

She looked at me, her head on one side, her lips pursed.

"What a pity, Nicola."

Her eyes roved over me again. It's been a few years since I was assessed in such an overt manner, and I shifted uncomfortably.

"You certainly have good taste.... My, what fine shoulders and such a glorious mane of hair. My fingers itch."

That did it! I was getting a haircut as soon as I could find a barber that worked nights! She pouted and whirled closer.

"When LaCroix hears of this, Nicola, and he **will**, you will lose your new 'friend' to him. Is that why you are telling me this? You expect me to shelter him from LaCroix?"

She moved closer and ran the tip of her tongue over her lips.

"Mmm! I could almost be tempted, Nicola."

Again Nick stepped between us.

"Stop drooling, my dear, it's most unbecoming."

"Faux! You are no fun!"

She flounced away and spun, swirling her skirts round.

"What is it that you want, Nicola?"

"A promise."

Puzzlement arched her fine eyebrows.

"What promise, Nicola?"

"That you would look after Mac and care for him."

"You ask much, Nicola."

"I know. Please, Janette?"

"This is important to you isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Oh, very well. But this is the last time I will put myself before LaCroix's anger for you."

He moved forward and took hold of her hand, raised it to his lips and kissed it.

"Merci."

She snatched her hand away and retreated towards the cacophony of sound thumping out its beat in the main room before turning once more to Nick.

"I have a message for you from one of the girls. The man you want for the three murders in the Grand Hotel on Central is Frank Sellars. Seems he wants to expand his business, and the girls don't want that to happen. The three most vocal against him are no longer capable of voicing their complaints. Do something about him Nicola, or I will."

With that, she left.

"If you are ever in need of a refuge for the day, you would find it here. Jeanette would make you

welcome."

"Too welcome..."

He smiled and glanced at the ground.

"Janette is a generous lover. You could do a lot worse."

"Thanks, but..."

"The pain you feel has not dulled sufficiently."

I nodded. The way I felt, it probably never would, for Janette was dark and beautiful, just like Mike had been. Too many similarities for my peace of mind.

"Come. I'll take you back to my place."

And with that, we headed back out into the uproar which passed euphemistically for music.

Once the curtain had fallen, I became aware of being the focus for many pairs of eyes. Several forms moved forward, only to withdraw as they came face to face with Nicolas. A hand caressed my buttocks and I jumped, bumping into Nick. He stopped and gestured for me to precede him. I was only too happy to comply. The watchers seemed to melt away as he scanned the room. Janette watched from the bar and raised her glass in a silent toast before sipping from it, and then we were back in the night air. I drew in several deep breaths and coughed as the cooler air hit my lungs. Nick waited until I'd finished and then gestured me towards the Caddie.

The drive back to Nick's place was punctuated by his request for an address for the man Janette had mentioned, and a chat with Schanke about the best way to go about finding him. I couldn't seem to stop yawning. Nick noticed.

"I was going to suggest we have another chat and sort out some more ground rules for this relationship we're in when I finished work, but I think you need to catch up on some sleep."

"That's all I seem to be able to do since this whole mess began."

"Your body is making massive changes, Mac. That takes energy. The change has to run its course. It's no use fighting it. If you had gorged on human blood the first time you drank blood then the changes would happen faster, but since you did not feed on human blood, it will take a little longer. Be patient, and make sure to finish what is left in the bottle we broached tonight before you even think of entertaining a visit from any of your friends. You might like to sort out which of your things you want to have around you and arrange to get them out of storage."

I must have looked as surprised as I felt.

"We have supposedly entered into a long term relationship, and having some familiar things about you will help to convince those skeptics amongst your acquaintances and mine that this is the case. Do you have a car?"

"Yes."

"Is the trunk big enough to use as a sanctuary if you are caught out in the daylight?"

I shook my head.

"Then I suggest you cultivate a love of 1962 convertible Cadillacs. I'll see if one can be located for you."

"I can't let..."

"But that is just it, you can. You must. Put your other car into storage for now. I know you are beginning to feel trapped, but it will pass once we have had a chance to talk further and get some details sorted out."

Damn it! He's doin' it again! Readin' my mind.

"I have several hundred years of experience to draw upon, Mac. Please. Let me guide you...."

I nodded and slid down in my seat. I'd sort it out tomorrow.

I shot bolt upright in bed, my hands shaking, my breaths coming in shuddering gasps, my body slick with sweat. I drew my legs up against my chest and curled my arms round them and rested my head on my knees.

"A nightmare?"

The voice coming from the doorway startled me even more, and I jumped. The figure came closer, and I saw that it was Nick, minus his black overcoat, jacket and shoulder holster. I nodded. He came towards the bed and sat on the edge of it.

"Who did you feed from and kill?"

"How... how..."

My voice failed me at this point, and I spent the next few seconds clearing my throat. Nick waited.

"A close friend? A lover?"

I drew in a deep breath and managed to talk without sounding like a rusty nail dragged across galvanized tin.

"A close friend. How did you know?"

"I get them too, but mine are actual memories, whereas yours are dreams of things that have never happened... that never will happen if you take appropriate action and safeguards."

"That's not much consolation...."

"Face the fact that you are terrified of hurting, even killing a friend for food, because you haven't learned to control your bloodlust, and you are one step closer to managing the beast that rides your back. You **will** learn to control it. I will help you."

I began to get out of the bed.

"Where are you going?"

"For a walk, to clear my head."

Nick shook his head and proceeded to undo his shirt buttons.

"The day is here, Mac. There is nowhere to go."

I looked at the broad chest, dusted with fine brown curls as the shirt disappeared into the laundry basket and then looked away as he tackled his belt and trousers.

"I used to make myself a hot drink when this sort of thing happened BC."

"BC?"

"Before Change."

"Oh."

"What do you do... if you don't mind me asking?"

"I paint. But if you want a hot drink, there's nothing to stop you using the microwave. Do you mind if we talk later? I'm rather tired."

I shook my head. Have a hot blood nightcap? Not this vampire. I shuddered as my far too fertile imagination gave me a mental picture and decided that painting might be a good way of laying my horrors to rest. I'd give Pete a ring later and see if he'd mind arranging for some gear to be sent over to me. I drew in a deep breath and started as the bed dipped as Nick slid beneath the covers. It's been a while since I've shared a bed with anything more than wet dreams or nightmares. This was going to take some getting used to.

"Peace-filled sleep, Mac."

"You too."

With that he turned on his side and drew the covers up. I lay back down, my hands under my head and stared at the ceiling. I began to replay one of my old hockey games in my head to keep the demons at bay.

The slide into wakefulness was pre-empted by the hair on my pillow tickling my nose. Then my brain caught up. Hair? Pillow? The hair was soft whorls of brown on a "pillow" that kept rising and falling! I froze as the gray matter began processing what the skin receptors were telling it. I was lying partially on Nick, my raised knee nudging his genitals, my own pressed against his hip. My left arm was curved over his waist, and my breath scudded across his chest! My lips were millimeters away from a tiny peak of a nipple. I didn't know whether to move and then apologize, or apologize and then move. I did feel the flush of embarrassment burn across more than just my cheeks. Seems that a certain part of my body knew what I wanted and needed even if my head didn't. Before I could decide, Nick spoke.

"Don't be embarrassed on my account, Mac. It's been a long time since I've shared sleeping arrangements. I'd forgotten how good it feels."

I swallowed and was trying to put a coherent sentence together, when he flexed his hips. My body's reaction was immediate, and I wanted to curl up into a ball and die from the shame ripping through me. I started to pull away when he reached out and stroked down my cheek.

"We have both been alone for too long, I think."

He continued to stroke round my jaw and neck, and I let him. It felt so good. I leaned into it and risked a kiss on the palm of his hand. His breath hissed out between his teeth, and I felt his shaft rising and hardening as he urged me to lie between his legs. I slid over, shaking with pleasure and shook as our erect penises came into contact. Nick held me, stroking down my back as I rested on him. I'd forgotten how good it felt to be held by someone else. I could feel my desire growing as his hands roamed over my back and then my buttocks. When he palmed them and pulled me closer, I groaned and felt my fangs moving down. I froze and tried to pull away. Nick held on to me. I fought against him.

"Let... me... go... I... can't control... I'll... hurt you."

He held me easily.

"Mac, listen to me. Listen! Mac!"

I stopped struggling, and he eased his grip a little.

"I will be fine, and so will you. This is a normal reaction. Learn from it. Trust me. I **will** be fine. Remember I am your Protector. Trust me to do just that, protect you from harm you would do yourself and others, albeit unintentionally, please."

He drew me closer once more and began to run his hands over my back, gentling me. I let him while I concentrated on retracting my fangs and waited for the sick feeling in my gut to ease a little. Nick thrust upwards with his hips, and I felt my shaft rising once again and bent to nuzzle at his nipple. I licked it, and his breath hissed between his lips. I sucked and licked until the tiny nub hardened, and then I switched to his other nipple. He growled deep in his throat and urged me onto my back. As I rolled over, he followed, and then it was my turn to palm his buttocks and squeeze them. He bent forward and nuzzled at my lips, licking and kissing them, before laying butterfly kisses over my nipples. I arched and cried out as the sensations built in me. I rubbed my hands across his back and buttocks, and he pulled free of my grasp and slid his hands up my abdomen, sliding over my sensitized nipples, tweaking them. I shuddered and gasped, and then he leaned forward, and, lying between my legs, placed his hard shaft alongside mine and began to rub against me. I opened my mouth to draw in huge gulps of air, and he kissed me, his tongue probing my mouth, dueling with my tongue, finally sucking on it. I remember palming his round buttocks to pull him closer as the sensations surged, and then I exploded into orgasm and blacked out.

I awoke cradled in Nick's arms, my head on his shoulder, my spent seed mingling with his, sticking us together. The bedding was tangled round our hips.

"Welcome back."

"Thank you."

I kissed the side of his neck. He swallowed, and his arms tightened round me. His shaft pulsed against mine, and sensations kicked through me too.

"Mac?"

"Yes."

"I would like to..."

"So would I."

And so we did.

The shrilling of the phone woke us several hours later, and I heard the answering machine kick in.

"This is Nick Knight. I'm either asleep or incommunicado. Leave a message at the tone."

"You're neither."

"Shhh!"

"Nick, it's Schanke. The captain wants us to pick up Sellars, so hustle partner. He's doing the rounds of his stable. If we're lucky, we'll catch him breaking the law. Meet you at *Corrie's* in an hour."

The message ended, and the dial tone cut in. Nick groaned and struggled out of bed and headed for the shower. I needed one too, but a naked and wet Nick Knight would be irresistible and would have to wait for another time. I sat up on the edge of the bed, and my head spun. My stomach lurched in protest as the colors mingled and swirled. I closed my eyes and waited for the world to stop spinning. Eventually it did, and I risked opening my eyes. Nick stood before me, a white towel slung round his hips, and water droplets beading on his chest. I swallowed as a surge of desire lurched through me, settling in my groin, which twitched.

"We need to talk, Mac."

I nodded and squashed the urge to lick away the beads of water resting on his skin. My breathing became a little more ragged as he came closer. He reached out and stroked my cheek, and I shuddered, my heartbeat lurching again. I wanted to strip the towel from him and run my hands over the pale, lean length of him. He smiled and inhaled sharply as I sucked one of his fingers into my mouth. I reached out one shaky hand and pulled the toweling from his hips and flung it to one side. I slid one hand up the back of his thigh and over the buttock, before repeating the action with my other hand. He inhaled sharply before resting his hands on my shoulders and urging me backwards. I was only too happy to comply. He towered over me and smiled before speaking.

"Much as I would love to take you up on the offer you're making, Mac, I have to go to work, and you must finish off the bottle of blood. You don't realize it, but your eyes are flickering gold and green which is the precursor to a full bloodlust, and I don't want to have to fight you to stop you from feeding. We'd both end up hurt. I'd much rather make love to you. So, while I get dressed, you need to have a drink. Finish the bottle we opened, and broach a new bottle just before dawn and drink two more glasses, and then, if you still want to get better acquainted, I'd be more than happy to oblige you. DON'T allow any human to come near you until you've had more to drink!

Understand?"

He nudged my legs further apart and knelt between them and kissed me before pulling back and letting me go. I stayed where I was, willing my body back under control as I watched him get ready for work. I'd enjoy peeling him from the layer of concealing clothing when he returned. He looked at me and stopped. It took me a moment to realize he'd spoken.

"Sorry, I was miles away indulging in a lustful thoughts. What did you say?"

"Go get your drink. I'll see you later."

I nodded and levered myself up onto my elbows as he tossed a dressing gown to me. I inhaled the unique scent of him as I put it on and drew it closed. I trailed him down the stairs, mesmerized with the innate grace of him, and my hands stuffed firmly in the gown pockets so I wouldn't grab the tempting buttocks moving in front of me. I headed for the kitchen area as he put on the shoulder holster, jacket and long, black overcoat. I stopped in the middle of getting the drink as a sudden thought struck me. I turned, and he was watching. His eyes were riveted on me. I checked, the gown wasn't gaping.

"What's wrong?"

He shook his head.

"Nothing. Just some lascivious thoughts of my own."

He drew in a deep breath and checked the pockets of the long coat. Keys tinkled. He nodded and slid his hand in the pocket and pulled them out and detached one, which he threw to me.

"Why don't you invite your friend over, and I'll see you come dawn."

I flushed, I know I did, and he snickered. That's the only way I know to describe what he did, and then he left. I put the key to one side as the door slid shut and went to sit on the couch. As I sipped from the glass, I pulled the phone closer and began to dial Pete's number at the Foundation. On the third ring, he answered.

"Thornton"

"Pete."

"MacGyver?"

"Yes."

"How are you?"

"I'm fine. I thought you might like to see for yourself."

"Chris is here with me. She's been asking after you."

I sighed. Time to face her and sort out a few things with Pete.

"Give me an hour and a half, and I'll be at the Foundation."

A pause as an off-phone conversation occurred and then Pete was back.

"That's fine with us. We'll see you in a while."

I hung up and hunted for some paper and pencil to leave Nick a note, before I finished up the bottle, rinsed it and my glass out, and headed for a shower.

I knocked on the door of Pete's office, opened it a little and stuck my head in. Pete looked up and smiled.

"Mac. Good to see you. Come on in. Chris has just stepped out for a moment. The ladies' restroom called she said. So, how are things?"

I came into the office and closed the door. I made sure to keep a distance from Pete in case he felt nervous.

"I'm fine. I thought I'd come over and sort out a few things, Pete. With the changes, I'm not sure I can still work for The Foundation."

He nodded and sighed.

"Well, I've been doing some thinking too, Mac, and while you won't be able to do all the kinds of things for us that you were doing, there are still lots you can do. I'm in the middle of compiling a list of the work available. I thought I'd give you a call when it was ready. For now, you're on a month's holiday, and we'll sort it out from there. How does that seem?"

I was touched. I'd turned into the local blood-sucking monster, and he still went to all this trouble for me. I wanted to hug him but didn't dare. The quick hug from Janice when we'd met at her desk had convinced me that I wasn't strong enough to resist all the temptation I'd likely to run into tonight, so I settled for a smile.

"Thanks, Pete. I really appreciate all the trouble you're going to for me. You don't have to, you know."

"I want to. You're my friend, Mac, and I don't leave my friends in the lurch."

He sat down at his desk and was about to speak when the door to his office opened, and Chris came in.

"Pete, I'll have to go. I've been paged. Arrange another time for me to see Mac..."

She stopped, and her whole face lit up with a smile.

"Mac!"

She headed straight for me, and I knew I couldn't avoid her because it would only hurt her feelings and give rise to more questions than I had answers for, so I braced myself. She stopped a pace away from me and began to circle me. I had to turn to follow her.

"Keep still, and let me look at you."

I did as I was told. I seemed to be following a lot of other people's orders lately. Not something I was used to or took kindly too, either. When she'd made two complete circuits of me, she stood in front, a huge, infectious smile on her face.

"Maybe I should listen to my other patients when they tell me they know what's best for them too. The time at the cabin obviously helped. Fresh air and sunlight must be good for you. I'm really pleased you're so well."

She leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek. I inhaled her musk and the scent she was using, and I felt a surge of hunger as the aroma of her blood pulsed at me, and the canines began descending. I closed my eyes and swallowed, fighting the urge to feed from her. She pulled back, and I breathed a sigh of relief as the hardware began retracting.

"Mac? What's wrong?"

I shook my head.

"Nothing. You're just too pretty for my blood pressure to cope with right now."

She laughed and turned back to collect her bag and coat. Pete's sigh of relief went unnoticed.

"Now I know you really are recovered, Mac. Take care. Bye, Pete."

We both raised a hand in a half-hearted gesture of farewell and waited until she was gone. Pete collapsed into his chair as the door to his office closed behind her.

"Phew!"

"Sorry about that, Pete."

He looked at me, horror lurking in his eyes.

"You were actually thinking about..."

He couldn't go on. I stayed where I was and shoved my hands deep into my jacket pockets.

"Thinking didn't have much to do with it at all, Pete. I'm still learning to control the urges. If I hadn't 'eaten' before I came, there'd have been no stopping me, and both you and Chris would have ended up dead. I'm sorry. I'd better go. I'll be at Nick's if you need to contact me, but I won't come to see you again until I can..."

I headed for the door, suddenly cold inside. His voice halted me.

"Mac!"

I stopped, one hand round the door handle, and waited.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to judge..."

His words seemed to trigger a wave of tiredness in me, and all of a sudden, I needed to escape, to run away. It was too much of an effort to try for sparkling conversation or witticisms, so I settled for a platitude, not really caring if he saw through it or not.

"It's okay, Pete."

He approached, and I gave ground, not wishing to get too close to him in case my resolve was not strong enough to fight the bloodlust.

"No, it isn't. I'm sorry I hurt you. All I can say is that this is a learning curve for me too, and I don't know what to expect, either. You caught me by surprise, that's all. Give me some time to come to grips with this. Please, Mac."

I nodded and managed to drag up a smile, as false as it was bright.

"Sure, Pete. I'll contact you later. Bye."

I moved past him, part of me cringing as he shied away from me, and headed straight out the door, closing it behind me. Janice had gone, so I was spared her concern. I rode the elevator down to the lobby and managed to be civil to Bob as I headed out the door.

Seeing Pete and Chris had been a mistake. They were a reminder that I wasn't part of their world anymore. Part of me wanted to smash something, tear it open, and rip it to shreds. An older, wiser part of me knew that doing that wouldn't erase the anger and betrayal I was feeling. Finding a safe way to vent my feelings wouldn't be a problem. I'd run. I checked my watch. Plenty of time. I began to walk faster, my pace picking up, and then I began to jog. I'd run until I was tired, and then catch a cab back to Nick's. My pace began to increase until I was at full stretch.

I ran and ran and ran, exhilarated by the effortless ease with which I covered the ground. I finally stopped in a park with a lake. I sat on a bench near the edge of the water and watched the evening breeze ripple the lake's surface. The moon tipped the wavelets with light, and I listened to frogs calling to each other. Considering the amount of ground I'd covered and the fact that I hadn't limbered up or anything, I didn't have any sore muscles, and I wasn't even breathing hard. Another plus for my condition? I'd have to ask Nick. Speaking of which, I checked my watch and frowned. Time to be getting back. I stood up and headed along the path in the general direction of the way I'd come in.

Ten minutes into my walk, and I knew I was being followed. There were three sets of footsteps coming up behind me. I stopped and turned. They stopped too, only they thought they were safe in the bushes at the side of the path, but I could see them plain as day. I turned and continued on my way. The footsteps returned too. They thought I'd make an easy target. Boy, were they in for a surprise. They followed me for a short distance, and then I heard them begin to run. I stood my ground and turned to face them. Young males, would be muggers, about twenty, wearing black clothing, heavy boots and carrying knives. Dangerous? Certainly. Human? Debatable. I felt my canines descending, for they reeked of sweat and adrenalin. They slid to a halt in front of me.

"Wallet, Granddad."

I shook my head.

"No."

"No?"

"You got a death wish or somethin'?"

"Your money, and maybe we don't carve you up like Sunday roast, or maybe we do anyway."

They began to circle me, feinting with their knives to make me move. I chose to stand my ground. One decided to up the ante and slashed at my chest. The knife tip scored across my ribs like wildfire, and I decided enough was enough. The next few minutes were busy ones. I grabbed one of them by an arm and swung him with all the force I could muster against his pals. They all went down in a heap, so I hauled the top one up and then grunted as the knife he held in his right hand slid between two of my ribs. It hurt! I punched him on the jaw, and he folded. The knife jerked out, aggravating already abused nerve endings, and I felt the oozing warm wetness of blood. Rats! As the two were struggling up, I grabbed them by their collars and banged their heads together. There was a rather sickening crack, and they ceased to be interested in taking any part of the proceedings. I checked my side. Great! Another shirt gone. I'd need a whole new wardrobe if things kept going the way there were going. I straightened up slowly. My side hurt. I swung the jacket over the injury and began walking.

Once back inside Nick's apartment, I leaned against the door. I was feeling light headed, and colors had the most alarming tendency to blur and melt into one another. I staggered over to the fridge, dragged the door open and pulled out a bottle. I yanked the cork out with my teeth and took a gulp. And kept swallowing. Warmth flooded into me, and the world stabilized, so I eased back on the bottle. I'd drunk half of it! I cast around for the cork and put it back in, before returning the bottle to the fridge. The rate I was going, I'd drink Nick out of house and home in a matter of days. I'd have to start paying my way. Only trouble was I couldn't see me ringing the local butcher and asking him to deliver a dozen of his finest steer's blood. Don't think that would go down well. I looked down at my shirt. There was a three-inch slice in it where the knife had gone in. I peeled away the material from the skin below it. It only hurt a little. As I suspected, the wound was closed over, and healing as I watched. I eased out of my jacket and tossed it on the back of a chair and shucked the shirt over my head. Maybe Nick knew of a good dry cleaner that specialized in mending garments. I sighed and headed upstairs. I'd rinse out the blood and hang it up to dry after I'd had another shower. I was halfway up the stairs when I realized I wasn't alone. I whirled round as Nick rose from the couch. He gestured at the shirt and my side.

"Want to tell me about it?"

I sighed and nodded and turned to come down the stairs. He shook his head and levitated up to the second floor. My legs gave out, and I sat down hard on the step, my mind trying vehemently to deny what my eyes had just seen. Laws of Physics just don't work that way. I shook my head and rubbed my eyes. I must be more tired than I thought. There was a logical explanation for this, wasn't there?

"Oh, man. Now I'm seein' things."

"No, you're not. I see I'll have to teach you how to fly, if only to keep you safe from harm."

I looked up at Nick. He was leaning on the railing, waiting for me. I sighed and got to my feet and climbed the rest of the way. He stepped up to me and took the shirt.

"Why don't you wash up?"

I nodded and headed for the shower. I set the water going and began to strip off the rest of my clothes. As the room filled with steam, I shoved the laundry into the basket and then stepped under the water. Needles of hot, fine water stung my skin and sluiced down me. The abrasions had healed, as had the cut, but a slight tenderness remained. I let the water beat at the aches and

pains until they eased and set about washing myself. The shower gel smelled of chestnut, and I luxuriated in the lather it produced as I let my mind wander back over the last few hours. I thought back to the meeting with Chris, how her blood had sung to me, the scent of her perfume sighing from her skin, the soft, silky thin layer that kept me from her richness, and I started to shake. I slid down the shower wall as bile rose in my throat. I kept swallowing. I had no desire to see what I'd only recently drunk again. I fought a brief skirmish with my stomach and won. But it left me gasping and shuddering.

I flinched when the shower cubicle door opened. Nick took one look at me and stepped into the water, crouching down beside me and pulling me into his arms. He used his back to shield me from the needle fine spray as I fought to keep the tears at bay.

"I'm here. I'll protect your friends. I won't let you harm them. I promise."

He held me while I cried.

Eventually the shuddering, gasping sobs subsided, and I managed to draw a deep breath. I sniffed and looked up.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now let's get dry and go to bed."

I nodded and staggered to my feet. Nick turned the water off and urged me out of the shower cubicle. He grabbed a nearby towel and began to dry me with it. I managed to coordinate mind and hands after a while and finished the work he began. He was able to dry off more quickly than I and was waiting as I finished and tried to hang the towel up. He took it from my grasp and tossed it in the laundry basket and urged me towards the bed.

Once I was lying down, he lifted the covers and slid into bed. He moved close and turned on his side and put his arms round me. It felt so good.

"What happened, Mac?"

So I told him.

"You did very well to control yourself. The urge was powerful, but you managed to deny it. And Pete and Chris are still alive. And the others?"

"They'll know they've been in a fight."

I sighed.

"It was a stupid thing to do. I let my temper get the better of me. I could have outrun them easily, but I felt hurt by Pete's reaction and didn't even try to leave. I *wanted* to hurt someone. They were handy."

I sighed again. I wasn't feeling real proud of myself. I could see my grandpa Harry shaking his head over my actions; just like he did that time I'd intentionally tripped an opposing hockey player to win a game.

Nick kissed my shoulder.

"At least you killed no one. I could not say the same."

"This time."

"As you say, this time. So, any more meetings with mortals need to be chaperoned, at least until you know you can control yourself. I will be that chaperone, but it means you will have a very solitary life while I am at work. Will you be able to occupy yourself?"

"Yes. I can paint, play the guitar, catch up on all the reading I've been meaning to do. I've a motorcycle that needs an engine tune up, and I've some computer extrapolations that I need to finish for the Foundation. As long as I can get out at night, I'll be fine. I'm on leave for a month. Do you think that will be enough time for me to learn control?"

"I don't know, Mac. My only experience is with vampires who have drunk human blood. I remember LaCroix was by my side all the time for the first few months."

"Months?"

I heard all the panic I was feeling in that one word. Nick did too.

"Yes. But remember, I was feeding from humans, and had to learn to be discreet. I have some leave accumulated. I'll request some. I'd like to see the cabin you mentioned, and since I too, have a motorcycle, we could go riding at night."

"I'm really turning your world inside out, Nick. I'm sorry. I..."

"You're not turning my world inside out, merely adding another dimension to it, Mac. And I am pleased to be of assistance. My only request is that you do for another of our kind, what I have done for you."

"Sure."

He kissed the base of my neck, and I shivered. The tingles centered in my groin. What can I say? It's one surefire way to get me going. My heartbeat and breathing fast tracked into overdrive, and I felt my shaft growing in length and hardness. He kissed me again, and I groaned. He rolled me onto my back, the question on his lips dying when he saw the state I was in and smiled.

"And here I was thinking you were in pain."

I reached up and grabbed a handful of thick, blond hair and pulled him to me. His lips were soft, and I plundered them, finally pulling back, before pushing the bedding to one side, so I could see all the long, lean length of him. He propped himself up on one elbow and allowed his eyes to roam. My desire climbed another few notches as he looked over me, and I was pleased to see that his shaft was growing in stature too. I reached out and began to trace the fine whorls of hair on his chest, rubbing over a tiny nub of nipple. It hardened under my touch, and I felt as well as heard Nick draw a breath in. I urged him backwards, and he went. I followed him down and began to lick across the nipple and then turned my attention to the other one. Nick's head tossed from side to side as I rasped my tongue over the sensitive tips, and he reached out and dragged me atop him as he kissed me, invading my mouth with his tongue and dueling with mine until we both broke apart to lick bruised lips. I thrust downwards with my hips, and he groaned. I hissed as he molded us tightly together root to tip, and then slid his hands round my hips and over my buttocks to squeeze them and force us even closer together. We began to thrust against each other, the friction eased by the fluid weeping from our shafts as we built towards orgasm. Climax ripped

through Nick a millisecond before me, and I tumbled over the edge and into utter delight as his seed spattered my belly. I collapsed on top of him too weak to move. Nick reached out and grabbed the sheet, pulling it across us as we drifted towards sleep.

I clawed my way towards consciousness with a vague impression that something was not quite right. I opened one eye and bolted upright, dragging the sheet as I went. My actions woke Nick, and he lifted his head, his eyes riveted on the menacing figure at the foot of the bed as he slowly sat up.

A tall, imposing male vampire with short-cropped hair and dressed in a black suit with a high collar stood at the end of the bed. His eyes were like smoldering red coals, his fangs were fully extended, and his speech slurred.

"So this is how you keep our agreement, Nicola! You take a mortal lover!"

He grabbed hold of the bed linen and hauled it away, leaving us naked on the bedding. The evidence of our lovemaking spilled across the sheets seemed to incense him further, and he

lunged for Nick, grabbing him around one ankle and hauling him towards him. I lunged towards him even as Nick shouted.

"Mac! No!"

I aimed to hit the intruder at waist height and take him down. The next thing I knew, he had a grip on my hair that was scalping me and one arm twisted so high behind my back that I could feel the tendons tearing. I wasn't moving because of the waves of pain beating through me. I could smell the rage coursing through my captor, and I risked a glance at Nick. He was kneeling on the bed, all fangs and golden eyes. The material of this man's suit rubbed across my skin even as his grip tightened, and I groaned with pain as he jerked my arm higher.

"I may not have your sister for a lover, but you, **YOU**... How dare you Nicola!!! This mortal is mine. I shall enjoy watching you suffer when I take him."

Nick got off the bed and advanced towards us. I was pulled backwards, and I went. Anything to stop the pain searing through me, and then he pulled my head back, exposing my jugular.

"Let go of my property, LaCroix!"

"Property, Nicola?"

"Yes. He is one of us, LaCroix. You would know this if you weren't so incensed. I am his Protector. I say again. Let go of my property!"

"Is that so, Youngling? Lie to me and I ***will*** rip your heart out."

"It's true."

"Prove it. Feed from him."

He let go and pushed me towards Nick. I stumbled and my shoulder screamed in protest as my arm moved. Nick leapt forward and gathered me to him.

"He feeds from you Nicolas, or I'll kill you both, here and now."

Nick nodded.

"Very well. Mac?"

He eased me away from him and held out his wrist. I remembered the rich flavor of his blood and shook my head.

"I couldn't stop."

"Do you trust me, Mac?"

"Of course."

"Then go ahead. I will stop you."

I looked at LaCroix, and then back at the expanse of white, almost translucent skin before me and stepped closer. I laid my lips on Nick's skin and felt the fangs descending. I bit down hard, and felt Nick flinch and then rich, warm, heady intoxicating life flowed into my mouth, and I began to suck and swallow.

Gradually, I felt the pressure of Nick's hand in my hair hauling me away from him, and reluctantly, I allowed him to pull me back. I stayed where I was, resting on the lean, well-muscled form of him, his arms around my chest. I looked up at the one he called LaCroix, licking away the last of the blood from my lips. Languor flowed through me, and I allowed my head to fall against Nick's shoulder, my head to one side, my throat exposed.

"You have taught him good manners, Nicolas. He waits for you to feed from him. As you say, he is one of us. You have not yet loved a mortal. But our agreement still stands. One day, when you have fallen in love, I will take from you what you have taken from me. As we agreed?"

Nicolas nodded.

"As we agreed. If I ever truly love a mortal, that mortal is yours."

LaCroix nodded and then smiled. It was brief, menacing and lacking in sincerity.

"I do apologize for interrupting your *sleep*, Nicolas, but I could not be certain Janette was telling the truth. As you know, she has a soft spot for you. I thought she was covering for your human lover. I see I was mistaken. Your debt still stands."

"As does your word that you would not invade my life."

LaCroix bowed, and there was a whoosh of air, and he was gone. Nick urged me towards the bed. I was only too happy to comply. The way I was feeling, I doubted very much that Nick and I would get any sleep. The blood of an eight hundred year old vampire is a very heady brew! And I remembered an old Chinese curse, 'may you live in interesting times'. It seems I would be doing just that!

A Light In My Darkness -

Nick's Story

"Nick? Nick? Hello! Earth to Nick!" I broke from my memory of the night I'd brought Marcel across and the horror of seeing him destroyed as he fed, by the mob LaCroix had led to him. My partner's strident tones grated on my tired nerves. I never slept well on the anniversary of Marcel's death. After all, I was responsible for his condition. If I had not loved him, then he would not have been destroyed. The familiar ache rose to tear at me, and I drew in a deep breath and turned to the presently aggravating annoyance otherwise known as my partner, Don Schanke. It was not his fault I was out of sorts and hurting. I managed to focus my attention on him and look interested. It was going to be a long night.

"Report of a murder on the docks. Seems we have an eyewitness. One that's still alive, no less." I gathered my coat and headed towards the door. I was ahead of him and turned back.

"Come on, Schanke, we'll take the Caddie."

He grunted. "When don't we?"

He lengthened his stride to catch up to me.

"Just one thing."

"Yes?"

"You don't do a disappearing act on me like you've done the last two nights."

I did my best wounded look, all guileless blue eyes and gentle smile. I've had over eight hundred years to get it right, but Schanke was unconvinced. I could tell by the stubborn set of his jaw. I sighed mentally. Tonight was going to be one of those nights where my partner became a real thorn in my side.

"Promise?"

I nodded and pushed open the door and walked into the night air with him at my heels.

Once in the Caddie, I traveled towards the dock area. My Master's voice oozed over the airwaves, and Schanke shifted uncomfortably in his seat and cleared his throat. He doesn't like The Nightcrawler, LaCroix's alter ego. I took the hint and shut the radio off. LaCroix's last words echoed jarringly across me.

"...and shouldn't a duty that is owed be discharged, utterly, to the best of your ability, dear listeners?..."

"...Your duty is to me, Nicholas! Me! Not some snotty nosed urchin grubbing about the streets! Of course, I got rid of him in the one way guaranteed to get your attention and remind you of your place. Remember, I made you. I gave you life! And you will do as I say. I do not want your attention wandering. I want you focused on the baron. He has expressed an interest in you. You will... reciprocate... his interest."

"No!"

I'd got no further than that denial before he knocked me flying. I hit the wall with enough force to make my teeth rattle, and then he was upon me, his hand closed round my throat as he lifted me off the floor. His eyes were red with fury, his voice a sibilant hiss.

"You insolent pup! You will do as I say, or I'll chain you to the wall and festoon you with crosses. You won't die, but you'll certainly wish you had."

I shook. He'd done that to me once before, a few years ago, and I'd spun at the end of a chain, screaming myself hoarse at the searing pain from the burns that ate into my skin. Each day, his human servant had taken the crosses from me at dawn, and each dusk she'd returned them, adding one more. This had gone on for two weeks, and I was not eager to repeat the experience. I lifted my hands to his, trying to ease the strangling grip he had on me so I could speak. He threw me back against the wall.

"You are mine, Nicholas, and will do as I bid you, yes?"

I nodded as best I could and then fell to the floor as he released me. I would have to wear high collars and much lace to hide the marks that night. The physical bruising would fade swiftly enough...

"Nick?"

"Uh, sorry, Schanke, I was thinking about something."

"The case?"

I shook my head.

"No, something else entirely."

"I might as well talk to myself."

Now my partner was sulking! For the sake of harmony, I set out to cajole him into a sweeter frame of mind. It was going to be a very long night!

"What do we know about the case, anything?"

He turned and looked at me.

"I knew it! You weren't listening to a word I said. Damn it, Nick!"

I cut across what would be a good quarter of an hour gripe session, hoping to sweeten his temper a little. Failing that, I'd resort to my "tricks" as Natalie referred to them, and use my mind control skills on him. It is an unfair advantage I have over some mortals, but sometimes I need the peace and quiet!

"I was only joking, Schanke."

I looked more closely at my partner. He was frowning and checking his watch and muttering.

"'Don't be late tonight, Donny. Remember, I'm cooking a special meal.' Yeah, right. We'll be here at the scene for hours. Myra'll blow her stack. I'll try some flowers. Sheesh! Where am I going to find flowers at this time of the night?"

"Problems, Schanke?"

His head snapped round in my direction, and he glared at me, before closing his eyes and slumping against the upholstery. I smiled. I knew it was Myra and Schanke's wedding anniversary to-

night. I also knew he'd tried to trade a night shift with some of the other guys and been unsuccessful, so Natalie and I had arranged something special for him and his wife, but I was going to let him stew about tonight for a little while longer before I let him off the hook. He is way too complacent about Myra.

We turned into the dock gates, and I slowed the Caddie as a uniformed officer approached. I had my identification out. He glanced at it and motioned us on through.

"Straight down this road until you reach a sign that says wharf twelve, berths fifty to seventy. You want berth fifty two."

"Thanks."

I accelerated slowly, looking ahead for the sign. I would have no trouble sighting it, but it would be a little too suspicious if I sped straight to it. Humans have poor night sight, and since I was "masquerading," as Janette put it, I had best act as one.

The sign loomed up ahead, and I eased the Caddie over to a lamppost and parked beneath it. Schanke struggled out of the car.

"Where do we go from here?"

I heard the paramedics ahead of us and could see the flashlights of the officers as they searched the area. I was about to *guess* where we had to go when I heard approaching footfalls and saw the swing of a lighted torch. It swung up to blind me momentarily, and I heard Schanke's hiss of annoyance, before it swung down to pool light at my feet.

"Homicide. Detectives Knight and Schanke. Where do we go, Officer...?"

"Rawlins. I'll lead the way."

The officer turned and headed back the way she'd come. Schanke was complaining again.

"I wish they wouldn't do that, flash the light in your eyes like that. It hurts, and I can't see a damn thing. If I trip over, I'm gonna sue the department for any damages."

I sighed and headed after her.

"Hey, Nick, wait up!"

I heard his footsteps behind me and stopped for him to catch up to me. I could hear the paramedics as they worked trying to save a life. The sea breeze ruffled my hair and brought with it the tang of salt. My teeth ached as a memory of another salt flavor rose to torment me. I could hear Schanke's heartbeat thudding away regularly in his chest at human normal. I drew in a deep breath and forced the blood lust down. I had a job to do. Schanke was talking again, still, and I forced myself to listen to him.

"I'm tellin' ya, Nick, Myra is not going to be happy about us missing her fancy dinner."

"You'll just have to make it up to her, Schanke."

"Oh, right! How do you suggest I go about achieving that miracle, Nick?"

"Tell her that you'll take her out to dinner tomorrow night at Michelle's."

"What! You gotta be kiddin'. I don't make enough in six months to be able to afford that classy place."

"My treat."

"Nick, I don't think..."

"I know, but humor me, Schanke. Trust me, she'll love it."

"Yes, but we'll have this case to work, and the captain is not feeling generous."

"Yes, she will, especially when I tell her that it's your twenty-fifth wedding anniversary dinner."

"Oh, man. I'm dead. Myra'll kill me for missing this one."

"No, she won't when you tell her you have reservations for Michelle's tomorrow night at eight. Nat's volunteered to sit for you, and I'll cover for you at work. Consider it our gift to you and Myra."

"Nick, I don't know what to say..."

"Say thank you, Nick."

"Thank you, Nick."

"My pleasure, now let's see what we have here."

I looked up as the paramedics collected their patient and drug boxes and moved off towards the ambulance. A bundle of what looked like old rags lay spilled on the wharf. To one side stood several police officers beginning to secure the crime scene.

Further down the dock area stood a man. He was six foot two inches tall, wearing blue jeans, a lumberjack style check shirt with the sleeves rolled up over a white t-shirt, and white sneakers. His brown hair was shoulder length in back, shorter on the sides, with a couple of bangs, which flopped over his eyes as the breeze blew.

He was watching us, and I could see the blood of one of my kind as it was spattered across the wood, mingling with the fresher human blood. I drew in a deep breath, glad I'd *eaten* earlier. The half bottle of aged steer's blood was rank in comparison with the sharp bouquet that stained the decking, but it allowed me to contain the beast within me that reveled at the spilt blood. I looked up as Officer Mary Radonovic approached. She was writing something in her notebook.

"Hi, Mary, what do we have?"

One deceased male Caucasian, of indeterminate age, Nick, Schanke."

"Manner of death?"

"Not sure what killed him, Nick. The coroner'll have to decide."

"No bullets, I take it?"

"It's weird, Schanke."

"Define weird, Mary."

"A wooden stake through the heart; garlic round the neck and in the mouth; several burn sites in the shape of a cross; four broken bottles tangled with the clothes, which from the burns were probably filled with acid. I mean what kind of killer are we dealing with here?"

I knew exactly what kind of killer. One who knew about vampires and how to deal with them. Saying so out loud would have me up before the psych re-evaluation board so fast it would make my head spin. I looked at the stranger standing to one side. Had he done this, or was the one that was carted away in the ambulance responsible? Either way I had to be on my guard.

"One who's been watching too many horror shows if you ask me. Anything else?"

Mary nodded and held out a small, slim case. I took hold of it.

"Just this."

"Drug addict, maybe, Schanke?"

"I've never seen a needle filled with that kind of stuff before."

"Witnesses?"

"Just one. He helped hold the guy's throat together 'til the paramedics got to him. Might have saved the guy's life."

"Anyone talk to him yet?"

"No."

"Okay, we'll take it from here. Thanks, Mary."

"I'll start a door knock, or is it a boat knock?"

"Great, and see if we can get a bit more light here. I'm not real happy about working in the dark."

"Sure, Schanke. I'll see what I can rustle up."

Mary walked off, calling to two of her colleagues as we headed towards our eyewitness. As we walked towards him, he straightened. I could see the blood covering his hands and wrists. It called to me. I had to stick my hands in my pockets to disguise the trembling. I stopped in front of him and smiled.

"Hi. I'm Detective Knight, and this is Detective Schanke. I believe you can help us."

He nodded.

"I can tell you what I heard and saw. You mind if I get cleaned up?"

He held up his blood covered hands, and I know the bloodlust rose in me, coloring my eyes mo-

mentarily. I could feel it. Ruthlessly, I pushed it away, noting that the man shivered briefly. I smiled to reassure him.

"Not at all Mr....?"

"MacGyver."

"As long as you don't mind us watching or taking blood samples."

"That's fine by me. Door's open. Can one of you get the handle for me? I don't want to..."

"Sure."

I let Schanke hold the door open for Mr. MacGyver and myself. We both watched the blood covered hands, both for different reasons. I was mesmerized by the waste, Schanke, by the amount of evidence covering the man. The witness held up his hands and indicated the sink, and I nodded. The bouquet of blood filled my nostrils, and I inhaled deeply. The scent was all I was going to get, and when I noticed our witness was watching me, I turned to inspect the room. It was bare of belongings. Several large packing cases stood to one side, and there were clearly labeled boxes piled against one wall.

"Going somewhere, Mr. MacGyver?"

"Yes. I'm moving up to a cabin in the mountains. The movers are due tomorrow."

Schanke smirked, pulled an evidence bag from his coat pocket and wandered over to MacGyver and scraped a little of the dried blood into the bag.

"You mind if I have a look upstairs?"

"Be my guest."

As Schanke headed up the spiral staircase, MacGyver managed to turn the taps on and began to wash away the blood. I continued to wander round the room, confident I could stop him if he decided to run, noting what kind of man MacGyver was from his possessions. An ice hockey stick was balanced against one crate, the edge of a jersey under the half closed lid of the box, a pile of books on various aspects of chemistry, math and physics three quarters filled another case. Yet another box contained cooking utensils and implements. I felt a vague unease and then realized that there were no food smells to nauseate me. I wandered over to the staircase and leaned on it as I heard Schanke's returning steps. MacGyver heard them too, for he looked up, before continuing to scrub his hands and wrists. Schanke stopped halfway down the stairs and leaned on the railing. He shook his head. There was nothing suspicious upstairs. I straightened and smiled.

"So, what can you tell me about the incident that happened right outside your door, Mr. MacGyver?"

He rinsed his hands one final time and turned, reaching for a towel to dry himself. He drew a deep breath and then relaxed back against the sink.

"I'm not sure I can tell you much. I was upstairs checking that I'd emptied all the cabinets when I heard a scream. I ran downstairs and looked out. There were two men fighting. By the time I got there, one was dead, and the other had his throat ripped open. I called the paramedics and the police and waited for them to arrive. The rest you know."

Schanke straightened and came down the stairs. I could tell he did not believe the bald statement of facts that he'd just heard. I didn't either. Something had been glossed over or edited for our benefits. I let Schanke go ahead. I could intimidate the witness at the station if it became necessary.

"You seem pretty cool about the whole thing, Mr. MacGyver. This kind of thing normal for you is it?"

MacGyver shook his head, a spark of anger glinting in his eyes, and roughing his voice a little. Schanke didn't hear the minuscule shift, but I did and it aroused my interest.

"No, this kind of thing is not normal."

"What do you do for a living, Mr. MacGyver?"

"I work for The Phoenix Foundation."

"Doing what?"

"Lots of things."

"Like?"

"Like, ecological surveys, retrieving data, testing security systems, reuniting families. Peter Thornton's the director. You could get a more detailed list from him if you want."

He looked at me, meeting my gaze, and I was startled. His eyes were flecked with green and gold. He was feeling the blood lust. He blinked, and then it was gone. I would have to pay him another visit tonight to find out what truly happened here. Time to finish up the questioning for now.

"Thanks for your time, Mr. MacGyver. We'll be in contact."

Schanke had walked down the stairs and finished checking what he had written down in his notebook as MacGyver spoke.

"Come down the precinct in the morning, and we'll have your statement ready for you to sign."

MacGyver swallowed and suddenly wiped the palms of his hands down his trouser legs.

"Uh, could it wait 'til tomorrow evening? I, uh, have a skin condition that reacts with sunlight."

I just bet you do.

Schanke smiled and then nodded.

"Sounds like you and Nick have something in common. You should get together sometime and swap stories."

MacGyver looked puzzled.

"Nick has the same problem. That's why he works permanent night shift."

"Oh, right."

The smile loosed in my direction was less than enthusiastic.

"I'll see you tomorrow night then, detectives."

He would see me a lot sooner. Just as soon as I could *convince* Schanke that he ought to do the report for the captain, I was heading right back here to have a talk with Mr. MacGyver. I let Schanke go ahead of me and heard footsteps as we were trailed to the door. I looked out. Natalie was here. I crossed to her.

"Hi, Nat."

"Hi, Nick, Schanke."

"So, what can you tell us about the John Doe, Nat?"

"Well, cause of death is due to heart failure. Someone shoved a wooden stake through it."

She risked a quick glance at me. I shook my head slightly so she continued on.

"I'll know more once I get him on the slab. The same goes for the syringe you found. If you're all finished here?"

I nodded. She could take the body. She would need to. Come morning, the remains would dissolve into so much fine ash.

Schanke, always uncomfortable round the subjects of her work, not her, walked towards some of the uniformed personnel as the body bag arrived.

"We'll meet you back at the lab after we go see the injured man. Take care, Nat."

"Always, Schanke. Nick, got a minute?"

I nodded and turned my back on my partner to get a glimpse of our witness one more time and to protect Natalie if he so much as took one step in her direction.

"I'll wait for you in the car, Nick. And Nat?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for offering to sit for Myra an' me."

"You're welcome, Schanke."

He walked briskly towards the ramp as Natalie pulled me to one side.

"What's going on, Nick? Is that what I think it is?"

"I'm not sure what is going on, but yes, the corpse was a vampire, so you'll have to finish your tests before dawn. I'll catch up with you later, Nat."

She nodded and turned back to watch the corpse being loaded into the body bag.

I thought back to my first meeting with Natalie. I had tried to stop a gang robbery and been tossed a pipe bomb for my trouble. I'd ended up in Nat's care. I'd scared her, rearing up with fangs and golden eyes, but she recovered quickly and actually reached out to touch me, even after she'd seen me drain a bag of blood dry.

The slamming of the meat wagon doors brought me back to the present, and I went in search of my partner.

He stood leaning against the side of the Caddie, arms crossed and a dopey smile on his face. Obviously, his memories were fond ones.

"Schanke?"

"Mmm?"

He turned his head and looked at me, and I began.

"You're going to go back to the office and type up tonight's report. Ring the hospital and see if they have any information on the injured man. You'll get a lift with one of the patrols. When you are asked where I am you, will say that I am checking out some leads with one of my informants. I will see you at the precinct later."

He nodded and straightened up and walked over to a group of uniformed officers. I unashamedly listened in.

"Hey, are any of you headed back to the station? I need a lift. My partner's got a lead to chase up."

Several shook their heads, but one raised her hand.

"I'm headed back, Detective. I can give you a lift."

"Thanks."

The group split, several officers headed for the next row of boats, while Schanke and the female officer headed towards a cruiser parked closer to the dock.

I turned and stepped back into the darkness before lifting and flying back to MacGyver's houseboat. I landed in the shadows by the front door and eased the front door handle down. It opened. Mr. MacGyver was either very trusting or very careless. I stepped inside and looked. He was sitting on a couch strumming a guitar. His slender fingers deftly picked out the chords, and a soft, sad melody flowed over me. I stepped closer. He looked up.

"When were you 'brought over,' Mr. MacGyver?"

He breathed in sharply and put the guitar to one side.

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about, Detective."

I didn't have time to play verbal tag. I moved to him, grabbed him by the upper arms and hauled. I had him dangling a foot off the floor before I spoke again.

"You are one of us. Who brought you over?"

Part of me cheered when he snarled back at me.

"None of your damn business. Now unless you intend to rip my throat out or shove a stake through my heart, put me down!"

I lowered him slowly before releasing him. He stood rubbing his arms. He would briefly wear bruises in the shape of my fingers. I stepped back and retracted my fangs, allowing the gold to fade from my eyes. I indicated the couch.

"We need to talk."

He nodded. I risked a brief smile.

"Who brought you over?"

"The one with the stake in his heart."

"Did you kill him?"

He shook his head.

"No, but I'm glad he's dead."

He suddenly sat up straighter. He looked at me, brown eyes wide and filled with fear.

"He ***is*** dead, isn't he?"

I nodded. Oh, yes, definitely. Whoever had taken on the Old One had known what they were doing and had done a very thorough job of it.

"But will he stay that way?"

I nodded, reassuring him.

"Oh, yes, we can be killed."

I paused briefly and then continued. This Youngling had to know the rules for living in my city from the start. If he chose to ignore them, I would kill him.

"I have some advice for you. You're new to this city, so here are the rules. **Don't ever** hurt a human. If you do, I'll hunt you down or give you to The Enforcers..."

"Whoa! Stop right there, Detective. I don't hurt humans. I used to be one, so back off! Just who are The Enforcers you spoke of? Can they help me?"

His naivety astounded me.

"Help you? They'll kill you if you break our code."

"Code? What code? Hey, help me out here. I have no idea of what you're talking about."

I stood up and began to pace. What had his maestro been doing? Lax a father as LaCroix was, he'd made sure I understood the code and could function in our society. I needed some answers.

"How did the priest find you? Why were you living in the open? It only invites disaster. How did the count get caught? Why weren't you with him?"

I stopped pacing and waited for him to answer me. He ran his hands through his hair and looked at me, obviously puzzled.

"Your questions don't make a lot of sense."

What!?

"I've no idea how Father Jansci found me, or even why. The last time I saw him was just over two weeks ago when he let me sleep in his house while he was holding vigil. That's the same night I met the count, and he... he used his powers to... to..."

MacGyver drew in a deep breath, swallowed, and continued.

"I guess the count was coming to claim what he thought was his property, me!"

This was not good. To bring a human over against their will was against our code. The Young made this way were too unstable and rash and brought the attention of not only The Enforcers but of the wider human community upon us with destructive results. I needed more information.

"When did you first feed?"

"Four days ago."

The change has well and truly begun then.

"On what?"

"It's none of your business."

Oh, yes it is, Youngling. If you have fed on human blood, your life is forfeit here and now!

"It is if it was human."

"Hey! I won't drink human blood. I told you that."

So, what was it?

"What was it?"

I held his gaze and exerted some power. He relaxed a little and answered.

"A fawn's blood."

So! You are a predator. You bear close watching, my young one.

"You killed it?"

"It was dying. Some idiots were shooting anything that moved. It blundered into to me and... and before I knew it, I was..."

He is not comfortable with this change. Perhaps there is hope for him.

"So your Master is dead?"

"If you mean Count Grigor, then I certainly hope so."

"Does the priest know what you are?"

He shook his head.

"Does anyone?"

He nodded.

"Who?"

I need to pay this person a visit and rearrange his or her memories.

"A friend."

How good a friend, I wonder.

"One you would trust with your life?"

"I have."

"This friend understands what you are?"

"Yes."

"Good. You will need a friend to survive this."

"I don't think I want to, not like this."

Uh, oh.

"You didn't ask to be brought over, did you?"

He shook his head.

"No. Didn't have any say in it at all. I'm still findin' out what I can and can't do."

He rubbed his eyes. I couldn't leave him to blunder about in our world. He'd bring human attention to us all simply because he didn't know the rules to live and play by. I had a choice. I could either kill him here and now, or become his Protector and teach him, so that once he had all the facts he could make his own decision. And if he wanted nothing to do with our way of life, I could ease his passing.

"So, what happens now?"

Now my Youngling, you come with me.

"Now, you ring your friend, and tell him you'll be staying with me for a few days."

Well, it will be longer than that, but there's no reason to scare him into running.

"What?"

Here's the truth, Young One. Hope you can handle it.

"If you are going to survive, then you're going to need some help. Your 'Master,' the one who brings you 'over' teaches you what you need to know, and looks after you, but since he is dead, you are 'fresh meat,' and as such, any vampire who finds you, can, under our laws, claim you as his or her property, and treat you as they desire, unless you can beat them in a fight. And one young as you wouldn't stand a chance. Now, I'm willing to play 'The Protector' for you, but it will mean some compromises on your part..."

"Now, just wait a minute! What do you mean by compromises?"

I sighed. This was not going well. I really didn't expect it would. I stopped pacing and turned to look at him.

"While I teach you how to move about in our society, and put you in touch with others that can help you survive in the mortal world, you will need to act like my 'property.'"

Yes, that definitely did not go down at all well.

"Now wait a minute..."

He was up and moving. I had him up against the far wall by the upper arms again in a second, and all his twisting and pushing availed him naught. He didn't even realize that his fangs had descended, and his eyes were golden, too. I held him easily.

"There are those who are older than I am who would welcome a Youngling like you as their fodder. If you cannot defeat me, how would you resist them?"

Come, young one, think!

He stopped struggling.

"You can let me go. You made your point."

I sighed at the despondent and defeated tone in his voice. I released him. He stood there, rubbing his arms. The bruises would soon be gone, and he would have only the remembered terror.

"I am sorry."

"For what?"

"For humiliating you that way, but I had to make you understand just how easy it would be for one of the others to take you and control you."

So much for my oath never to treat one of our kind as LaCroix had treated me.

"How do I know you won't?"

I felt a surge of anger and ruthlessly quelled it. What did he know of me, other than that I had invaded his home, bullied and humiliated him? Not good grounds for building a trusting relationship.

I smiled, all teeth and menace.

The truth, Mr. MacGyver? You have no option. One way or the other, you will do as I tell you.

"You don't. You'll just have to trust me."

"And why should I trust you, and not one of the others?"

I stepped into his personal space. Intimidation – the one and only way to win friends and influence people!

"Because I give you my word that I won't hurt you."

Well, not physically anyway.

"That's it?"

I nodded.

"Why?"

The truth? Redemption. I need to earn it.

"Because I owe a debt to humanity."

"But I'm not human any more."

"True, but you weren't given a choice."

"You were?"

I nodded.

"And I made the wrong choice, and now I have to live with the choice I made. It's nearly dawn. What is your decision?"

He drew in a deep breath.

"What are the ground rules?"

Good! I smiled.

"I'll explain on the way. Bring what you need, and let's go."

MacGyver grabbed his backpack, guitar and sunglasses and followed me out into what remained of the night. He looked around, puzzled.

"Uh, how...?"

"I left the car by the gate."

He trailed behind me.

"What about your partner?"

"He's at the precinct, writing up the report for tonight."

I turned and smiled at him.

"In fact, he volunteered to do it."

The look I got was one of total disbelief.

"I need to make a phone call from the gatehouse."

"You can do that from my place. We will just have time to get under cover as it is. Come on."

We turned the corner, and I headed towards the Caddie.

"Wow!"

There was open admiration in that tone of voice, and nice as that was, we didn't have time for MacGyver to drool over my car. I turned to face him.

"While it has the biggest trunk space of any car built in the last thirty years, it will not hold both of us. You can admire it later, Mr. MacGyver."

"My friends call me Mac."

"Get in."

He put his belongings in the back seat of the car and got in the front. I started up the Caddie and reversed it out of the parking space and checked the sky. We had time to make it before the sun could rise and scorch us. I headed home.

The drive back to my loft was... uncomfortable. I had taken on what I had sworn never to – a Youngling. How could I, who wanted to be human again with all of my being, introduce a new Youngling into the world of the vampire? I wasn't sure I **could** do this, but I had to try. Mac's vestiges of humanity still clung to him and the pain in his warm brown eyes beat at me. I **knew** how he felt. Had I recognized a kindred spirit and been drawn to it? Or was it that misery loves company? I moved my hands over the steering wheel, and gnawed at my bottom lip. Whatever the reason I would try to ease his way.

A niggling voice mocked me from the radio.

"...We all **want** something from life. Some of us are honest about our desires, and needs. Others hide behind the mask of civilization and society's conventions and will do whatever it takes to get what we want. Man's inhumanity to man stems from this."

LaCroix was in a reflective mood.

"This is the Nightcrawler. Share your deepest, darkest desires and wants with me. I'm waiting for your calls."

I turned the radio off. Mac glanced at me and then went back to watching the streets go by, and I went back to contemplating how my world was about to change.

As the sun's rays began to steal over the sidewalks and pavement I turned the Caddie into my driveway and hit the remote. The garage door began to slide upwards and once there was enough clearance I drove into the darkness. My eyes adjusted automatically as the door slid closed. Mac was looking around. Not that there was such a lot to see. Only concrete and the rats. I didn't bother with the lights. Neither of us needed them. I got out of the car.

"Bring your things and follow me."

He nodded and reached for his bags. I waited by the elevator for him.

"Watch!"

He turned and I pointed to the keypad and punched in the sequence of numbers that would enable the elevator. I could see him repeating the numbers silently as I touched them.

"Got it."

Obviously a good memory. Would it help or be a burden to him over the years? We both had the time to find out, always presupposing I could keep my Youngling grounded enough so that he didn't go mad. **My** Youngling? When had Mac become mine? Was it a genuine need or a merely a distraction from my mundane life? I didn't want to look too closely at my motives, unsure of what I'd find.

The elevator rose smoothly and we were faced with the sliding door that gave access to my living area. Again, a keypad, and another number, different to the last. History has taught me to be **very** cautious. Mac watched closely and nodded. A quick study.

As we walked in he looked around.

"Nice place."

"Thank you."

I picked up the remote and pushed the button to close the shutters. Mac flinched as they clanged shut but didn't say anything. He looked lost. I reached out and took hold of the guitar. He was reluctant to let go of it. Had I ever been that attached to a belonging? I glanced over at the fireplace and then the piano. It seemed I still was. I put the guitar on a convenient shelf and gestured towards the second floor.

"This way."

I headed up the stairs. Mac turned and followed me. He tripped up the first step but righted himself easily enough. I waited for him outside my bedroom door. The next step would set the tone of our relationship. Would he accept the constraints necessary for our masquerade or would he balk

at every turn? He reached the top of the stairs and stared at me.

"What?"

"Part of the charade starts here."

He swallowed and licked his lips.

"We will have to share sleeping arrangements."

He gripped his bag more tightly, but his voice was calm when he spoke.

"You mean we will have to sleep in the same bed?"

I nodded, bracing myself for a hysterical outburst. He smiled and I blinked.

"Okay. Which side of the bed do you prefer?"

That's it? Calm acceptance?

I turned my head and rolled my shoulders to ease the tightness in my muscles.

"Uh, the left."

I opened the door and walked into my... **our** bedroom.

"Nice."

A man of few words it seems. I smiled. This was going better than I had hoped. I walked over to the walk-in wardrobe and began moving clothing aside making room for his apparel.

"It's fortunate that we share similar taste in clothes."

"That's important?"

I could hear the confusion in his voice.

"Yes. It will make playing our roles that much easier."

The penny dropped with a resounding clang.

"You mean..."

I could hear the outrage in those few words.

"That as your Protector I could tell you what to wear, among other things? Yes."

I turned to look at him. He'd stopped unpacking his bag and was standing across the bed from me, his hands on his hips.

"Whoa! We have some talking to do."

I nodded.

"We certainly do. When you're finished up here come down and we'll get started."

He stared at me, mouth agape. I almost felt sorry for him, but he would learn very quickly to do things my way. I had too much to lose and I was... comfortable in my life here, well, as comfortable as LaCroix allowed me to be. I headed downstairs. My Youngling was hungry. He didn't know it yet, but the green and golden flickers of his beast were showing in his eyes. I entered the kitchen area and opened the refrigerator and pulled out one of my green 'wine' bottles. I eased the cork out and felt my lip curl and my canines descend as the smell of food wafted from the bottle. I forced the canines back and grabbed two glasses from the overhead cabinet and proceeded to the sofa. I put the glasses down onto the coffee table and poured the blood into them.

As I settled on the sofa I heard the bedroom door open and Mac walked out and headed to the stairs. I watched as he walked down them, all lithe grace and smooth muscles.

When he approached the couch he faltered and stumbled. I could see the hunger ripping through him. I stood up and helped him to sit, then handed him one of the full glasses. He gripped it so tightly that I feared for the continued integrity of the crystal, and then shuddered, fighting the urge to drink.

"Wha...what kind?"

"Aged steer's blood. You will **never** drink human blood in my home. That is a promise."

My words released what control he had left. He raised the glass in both hands and downed the contents in one gulp. He managed to loosen his grip on the crystal as the first lot of blood eased the urge to feed voraciously. I immediately refilled his glass. I could see him trying to be more restrained but once the blood entered his mouth he downed the rest of the glass as quickly as the first. I could see the keen edge of the need easing as he put the glass on the table. He wouldn't look at me but fixed his gaze on the floor.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize..."

"There is no need to apologize, but try not to let your hunger become so great again, because you'll lose control and kill someone. Usually a human friend suffers when the bloodlust gets that strong, so if you want to keep your human friends alive, make sure you've fed before you see them."

"Lesson Number One, Detective?"

I ignored the sarcastic, bitter overtones in his comment.

"My name is Nicolas or Nick. And yes, lesson number one."

I poured some more blood into his glass before putting the bottle down and picking up my own glass and sipping from it. He mimicked me and I could see he was startled to find some measure of control.

"What does a Protector do, Nick?"

Oh, ho, not one for small talk. Straight to the point! It was... refreshing.

"Exactly as the name implies. Teach you, stops other vampires from using you for their carnal

pleasure and sport."

"And in return?"

"You do as she or he wants."

I could see the rebellion forming even as I spoke.

"I said I would 'play' the role and that is exactly what I will do. You will have to put up with snide remarks about my tastes, and me and possibly about you sexual preferences. I will have to be 'possessive' of my new 'toy', you, and you will have to tolerate it in public, and do as I ask you without question. It will not be easy for either of us, but if you wish to succeed in this society, you will need to play along. I give you my solemn promise that I will never use my powers to take advantage of you. If you find the idea completely distasteful, I can probably arrange for you to go with a female friend of mine."

His reaction was forceful in the extreme and caught me by surprise.

"NO!"

He shook his head and continued.

"Women I get involved with tend to end up hurt, maimed or dead. I don't want to risk the chance that your friend would end up that way because of me."

I smiled. No one I knew had thought of Janette in those fragile terms in well over eight hundred years.

"Jeanette would be amused that you would care about her welfare so much, even though it is misplaced."

He glanced at me.

"She is older than I. We share the same 'master'."

He stilled, eyes going wide. I spoke quickly to allay his fears.

"LaCroix cannot take you from me. No one can. You are mine until I release you..."

...or you kill me...

"There is a ritual that we must undertake before I leave for work tonight, and exchange of blood that seals the pact between us, a necessary formality, for your safety, and mine. If it is not done, then any vampire can challenge me, and if I lost..."

...when I lost, for my refusal to drink human blood cost me strength...

"...you would become their property. Something to be avoided at all costs I assure you."

He nodded. I knew there must be dozens of questions bubbling inside him, but good manners dictated that he wait until we were better acquainted before he began to pry into my private life. Outmoded human courtesy, but then he was newly come into life as a vampire.

"You must have lots of questions. Ask away. I'll answer."

A brief smile crossed his lips and warm brown eyes looked into me.

"You readin' my mind?"

I smiled and shook my head. Not a talent I possessed.

"No. But I was a Youngling once."

"Um, how old..."

"I was brought across in the year 1228."

I could see the calculations being done and then he swallowed.

"And there are older vampires than you?"

"Yes."

"You spoke of a code earlier. What is it?"

"A charter, if you like, drawn up by the 'Old Ones' to ensure that we survive. The 'Old Ones' are exactly that. The most ancient of the vampires. 'The Enforcers" are from them. They kill vampires that attract undue attention to our kind, and humans that know about us, and would expose us to the world. Your friend is safe as long as he or she does not try to tell the world of your existence."

"Reading my mind again, Nick?"

There was a touch of humor in the query, which was good.

"No. I have a human friend, too, but in vampire society humans are thought of as a food source or as a servant. To do the things we cannot do for ourselves, because of our limitations. As long as you are careful, you can have your human friendships, but in public you must never let it seem too important to you. Remember this! You will watch them grow old and die. Can you afford to let yourself get too involved?"

The words hurt, I knew, but they had to be said.

"And if the pain of this life gets too much?"

Thought about it already haven't you, Mac? I gave him the options open to all of us.

"You attract the attention of 'The Enforcers", step into the sunlight, immolate yourself, or get someone to shove an ash stake through your heart. Those are your options, Mac."

He shifted a little on the sofa. I could see none of them looked attractive to him at this point in time.

"Have you felt...?"

"Yes, but I have learned that I owe a debt to humanity, and I must repay it before I can rest."

I smiled and finished off the last of the blood in my glass.

"Sorry. I didn't meant to..."

He couldn't face me but concentrated on his drink. I reached out and touched his hand. He risked a brief look and I smiled.

"It's all right."

I had come to terms with the state of my life.

"Now, I need to sleep. Your choice. You can join me or you can amuse yourself down here."
"I think I'll stay down here if you don't mind."

I smiled and nodded.

"Why don't you ring your friend and tell him what happened."

He looked shocked at the idea.

"Tell him you've discovered an 'old' friend and you've decided to stay with him a while."

"But he'll..."

"Of course he will. But if it becomes necessary I will pay him a visit and alter his memories a little, so that we will remain safe. We'll talk again, Mac."

And with that I headed upstairs.

As I shed clothing I heard the soft murmur of Mac's voice. I pulled out the rarely worn black silk pajamas I heard the first strains of a guitar. Someone to play duets with? I settled into the bed and relaxed allowing the music to soothe me to sleep.

When I woke hours later I listened but could hear nothing. I flung back the bedclothes and grabbing the matching robe from behind the door strode out into the hallway and looked down. My Youngling was still here. He had fallen asleep, exhaustion and a full belly finally catching up with him. I turned around and headed back into the bedroom and its adjoining bathroom.

A hot shower is a human foible I have learned to savor. I relish the play of water on my skin.

I stepped under the soothing stream of water and reached for another human accoutrement that I enjoyed immensely. Chestnut scented shower gel made such a creamy, slick lather, which slid seductively over my skin. Having my Youngling here at play with me would be most enjoyable. My libidinous thoughts soon had my penis rising, thick and hard, and I longed to bury it in the lean, young body resting so unawares on my sofa. Time for the reality of that, later, if he was willing. For now I had my conjured visions to sate me.

I pictured rivulets of water streaming over Mac's broad shoulders, running down the well-defined pectoral muscles, over rucked nipples, down his flat abdomen to tiny massed ringlets of golden brown hair around heavy, seed filled sacs and hard shaft, and groaned. I fondled my testicles as I imagined his lathered fingers gliding gently over them and reaching for my penis. I leant back

against the tiles and fisted my thick cock, and pumped. The image of Mac on his knees, sucking me, triggered my orgasm and my seed arced to splash against the cubicle door. My knees gave way and I slid down the wall letting the water wash away the evidence of my pleasure. After a few minutes I pushed myself upright and finished my shower.

Showered, shaved and dressed fifteen minutes later I headed downstairs. As I passed the sofa I retrieved Mac's guitar from the floor and put it back on the shelf where it would be safe. I then turned back and looked at my Youngling. He was sleeping peacefully.

He stirred and opened his eyes. The deep brown of rich chocolate looked at me and he smiled briefly before looking around, his eyes coming to rest, finally on the guitar.

"It had slid to the floor. I assume you didn't want it left there."

"Uh, no. Thanks."

He looked delightfully rumpled as he rubbed sleep from his eyes.

"Did you reach your friend?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"And he was all for coming over here to check you out. I managed to persuade him that I was a big boy now..."

How big, I wonder?

"...and able to take care of myself, and that I'd introduce you both to each other as soon as possible."

"And he was happy with that?"

"No, but he agreed to that."

Mac plucked at his shirt and looked at me.

"Do I have time for a shower before we deal with the ritual you spoke of earlier?"

I nodded.

"Go ahead. I have some preparations to make."

He pushed himself up from the sofa, stretched and headed towards the stairs. I watched as his denim-clad butt moved sinuously up the stairs and wondered how it would feel to be buried to the hilt in him. The click of the bedroom door closing jarred me out of my lust filled daydream.

I checked the answering machine.

"Nick, Stanilaos here. I have that full-length leather coat you want. I'll send it by courier on Friday. Ring me back if this doesn't suit. Sorry about the pun dear heart."

There was a soft snicker or two and the call ended. The second one was my investment broker.

"Nick, Oliver. There are several investments falling due early next week. Contact me and tell me what you want me to do about them."

I'd get Stanislaos to find another classic Cadillac for Mac. Some of the money due from the investments would pay for it. The rest of the money would be reinvested to continue to fund the music scholarships I'd set up in Marcel's name. For with my one selfish act I had destroyed a golden voice. Perhaps another such voice would be found. I hoped so. I broke from my reverie and swallowed the ache. I could still hear his light tenor voice if I concentrated.

While I waited for Mac to return I undid the cuff button on my left sleeve and rolled the sleeve up past my elbow. I rested against the cabinets and waited.

A few moments later Mac walked out of the bedroom and headed down the stairs. He slid his leather jacket on. I smiled briefly as he approached and when he was close enough I tugged at the jacket.

"You'll need to take this off and roll up your right shirt sleeve."

He shrugged out of the jacket and slung it onto the nearest bench top, before rolling up his sleeve with neat, graceful movements. I looked him in the eyes and exerted some power for I knew he would not like what was to come.

"To seal this pact I am going to feed from you and then you will do the same from me. That way the others will leave you alone, and should they become bothersome I will be able to tell if you have need of my protection."

He shook his head, breaking eye contact.

"No. I won't drink human blood."

I laughed. Had he forgotten so soon?

"You forget I am not human."

And I called the change. Mac stood his ground, so I reached out and took hold of his arm and waited. He swallowed and then nodded. I lowered my head and rested the tips of my canines over his wrist. I tasted the remnants of soap and bit down. Richness flowed over my tongue. He still had some of the vibrancy of fresh human blood, the complete change not finished as he had only fed on animal blood. I savored it. I swallowed a couple more times and then drew back with one last lick over the wound. Already they were closing. I straightened up and held out my wrist. Mac seemed lost in a memory. I waited until he came out of it and then watched as he willed the change.

Soon, he was bending forward, his mouth resting on my skin. A tiny lick from his tongue and I shivered, and then he bit down, hard and I felt his canines slice through the skin. A brief flare of pain and then he was sucking. I knew he would have no control so I waited until he had taken a couple of mouthfuls before I pulled him away. He let go and staggered so I gathered him close and held him while he fought for control.

Eventually he pulled back and I let him go. He looked at me briefly and then his eyes skittered away from mine.

"Don't feel ashamed, Mac. It's called survival. Believe me, I would not have put you in such a position if it was not absolutely necessary."

His eyes were haunted as they flicked to mine and then away again.

"But... I... enjoyed it!"

Time to ram home the lesson. I walked towards him and he gave ground, spinning off cabinets, always retreating, until he hit the back of the couch and lost his balance, falling backward onto it. I was beside him immediately, the change in full evidence: eyes golden, fangs extended, my voice sibilant and hissing.

"The temptation is too great, isn't it Mac?"

"Yes."

Such misery in that one word. His eyes filled with tears.

"That's part of my job. To help you learn control."

I grabbed hold of his shoulders and gave him a shake.

"You must have at least two glasses of blood each day for the next month, while your body stabilizes and becomes accustomed to the changes. That way, any friend who comes in contact with you will not do so at risk of life and limb. It will also allow you to control yourself in public. Because, believe me, it will smell like a smorgasbord out there among the humans."

I released him and sat back against the sofa. I felt for my Youngling as he struggled with this information. Horror chased across his features. I had some of idea of what he might be thinking. He needed some more food before we went out to mingle with humans once again. He was too deep in his own thoughts to notice me as I got up and got a glass of blood ready for him. I returned to the sofa and held it out to him.

"Drink it, and then we have to get moving."

He sat up, sniffed, and wiped the tears away with the back of his hand. LaCroix would be horrified at such urchin-like behavior. I had some lessons in etiquette to give in the not too distant future.

I deposited Mac into the tender care of Officer Smythe. Wendy is a rarity. She can type **very** quickly and accurately. You'd think that after living so long I'd be a model typist. Not so. I learned early on that if you can type accurately **and** fast you ended up doing all the typing, so in the squad room my 'hunt and peck' routine was a good cover. Besides I could usually 'con' someone into to doing the paperwork for a good proportion of the time. Touch-typing was something I'd put in the 'to do later' box. So far I have managed to stave it off for over fifty years. I've taken procrastination to new heights.

I'd left Schanke 'hovering' over my Youngling, trying very hard to intimidate Mac into giving him some, until now, unmentioned information. I wished him luck. I don't think too many humans intimidate Mac at the best of times, and now that he was a vampire, well, let's just say that Schanke wouldn't rate very highly as a predator. There he was leaning forward into Mac's personal space.

"I think you know more than you're telling us, Mr. MacGyver."

Mac raised an eyebrow and settled back in his chair, a smirk hovering over his lips.

"That so, Detective?"

"Yes."

Schanke has all the finesse of a Mac truck! Time to step in before there blood on the floor, figuratively speaking. Mac looks all laid back and easy going, but I had a feeling that once he was angry it was a different matter altogether. And while the changes were still happening his emotions would be volatile to say the least.

"Schanke?"

"Yes, Nick?"

"Nat wants to see us."

"Be right with you."

"And Mr. MacGyver, too. She said something about tissue samples."

I noticed Schanke's wince before he turned to Mac with a patently cheery tone to his voice at the mention of that piece of information.

"Your lucky day, Mr. MacGyver. You get to visit the bowels of the Coroner's building. I'll let the captain know."

"Thanks Schanke."

Mac did not look happy at that piece of news and looked at me. I shook my head forestalling any questions he might ask and waited with him for my partner's return.

Mac's countenance did not improve as we entered the building but he dutifully followed Schanke and I along corridors and into Nat's domain. Schanke held open a door and I entered, reaching out to grab Mac as he did an about face when presented with the shiny autopsy table.

"Whoa! I'm outta here!"

I spun him round as Natalie entered the room and introduced them to each other.

"Natalie Lambert, I'd like to introduce Mr. MacGyver. He's here for tissue sampling, Natalie."

Mac raised a hand a waved it half-heartedly. His gaze kept roving over the metal table. He swallowed a couple of times. Seems he was a little squeamish. Natalie smiled at him, trying to put him at ease. She was wasting her time.

"This won't take a moment, Mr. MacGyver. I need to do a tissue scrape, and take a blood sample."

Mac paled at that comment. When Natalie turned back towards her desk Mac looked away, and Schanke drew in a deep breath and headed for the door. Both Natalie and I smiled. Schanke has a sensitive stomach when it comes to donating certain types of bodily fluids in the name of science. Natalie **loves** to tease him about it.

"What's wrong, Schanke?"

"The last time I hung around here while you were doing a tissue sample I ended up being a pin cushion. I'm leaving! I'll see you later, partner, and you can give me the news that the good doctor has, then."

And with that he was gone. Natalie and I both fought to smother our laughter. Mac still looked decidedly uncomfortable. As Natalie turned to face him he began to remove his jacket.

"You won't need to remove your jacket, Mr. MacGyver."

She tried to swallow her laughter but some of it came through. Mac looked at me and I nodded. Natalie approached him with a mini-lancet and a tiny jewel of blood tipped his right forefinger. I moved a little closer in case I needed to restrain Mac. Neither he nor Natalie noticed. My caution proved unnecessary. I turned to face her.

"What did you want to see us about, Nat?"

She looked at Mac before answering.

"Ah, don't you think..."

I shook my head and looked pointedly at Mac. He took the hint.

"The corpse you were dealing with Ms. Lambert..."

"Natalie."

"Natalie, was Count Grigor. The man who murdered him, thankfully for me, was Father Jansci, a priest I met two weeks ago when I was traveling through Romania."

I could see Natalie was going to interrupt.

"Now, wait a minute..."

"Hear him out, Nat."

She loosed a waspish glare in my direction but subsided. Mac continued.

"The good father was trying to save me from the fate some of his parishioners had met. Unknown to him, he was too late. The Count had already infected me."

Natalie was ...interested. She looked from me to Mac, her mouth opening and closing, but no words came out, yet. She wasn't skeptical she just didn't know which question to voice first.

"I... uh...'changed', if that's what you could call it, last week. I'm like Nick."

The confession had been hard for Mac and he turned away, shoving his hands into his leather jacket pockets. Nat was totally unfazed, the scientist in her coming roaring to the fore.

"Really? Can I... I mean... may I study your condition? I mean if I can find out what causes the changes then maybe I can reverse them."

My eternal soul was the price of her success. I desperately wanted Mac to agree, but I said nothing to influence him. This had to be solely his decision with no coercion from either Natalie or myself. But it was hard, very hard to stand there and look blandly at him as though this were no concern of mine.

"It must be your decision, Mac."

The disgusted look that comment caused had my lips twitching.

"It won't involve needles will it?"

My Youngling, the – 'could be' terror of humans everywhere, was afraid of needles? He could be shot and survive! Natalie nodded. Mac's shy vulnerability endeared him to me even more.

"I'm not a real big fan of needles."

"Then I'll try to avoid them as much as I can."

Mac didn't know Natalie very well and he believed her earnest delivery of that line. At that point in time Natalie believed it too, but the moment the 'scientist' in her took over Mac would become a research subject and as such would be jabbed with a needle as many times as Natalie thought necessary. Her idea of 'necessary' and mine differed greatly. I'm sure Mac would end up feeling the same way!

"Okay."

Natalie blinked and then smiled. It lit up her whole face. I just hoped Mac wouldn't regret becoming her guinea pig too much.

"Right... I'll organize some stuff and give you a call. Where can I reach you?"

Mac turned to answer and then paused. I cut in.

"At my place."

"Oh, fine."

Her look told me I'd be fielding lots of questions for quite some time the next time she could get me on my own. I needed to distract her, and I can't 'fiddle' with her mind like I can Schanke's.

"What about the corpse, Nat?"

"What? Oh, yes."

It worked!

"...Well, cause of death was heart failure as I said... Funny thing, the stake was tipped with silver.

The glass vials held water."

"Water?"

I couldn't see the importance of them until Mac spoke up.

"Holy Water, maybe?"

Both Natalie and I looked at him. He shrugged his shoulders and continued.

"Well, he's a priest. He'd have access to Holy Water, wouldn't he? And he probably heard all the stuff about its affect on vampires that I have."

I shuddered. The whole discussion made me twitchy. Natalie nodded accepting his idea. I perched on the edge of her desk.

"Valid point, Mr. MacGyver."

"Mac, please."

"Mac. I'll get Grace to organize some samples from our local area and then compare it with the sample from the crime scene."

"What about the syringe, Nat?"

She looked up at me and smiled. Here was some news I was sure I wouldn't like.

"Oh, that's a real gem, Nick. It contains silver nitrate. It'll kill you within seconds. Not just vampires, anybody. Nice little weapon."

Heaven help us if Natalie ever decides to turn criminal.

"...I have the good father's fingerprints all over the case and the syringe. I also have a partial match on the neck of the flask of Holy Water of Father Jansci's left thumb and forefinger. That couple with a clear imprint of his little finger, right hand, on the stake and he's your killer – or executioner – or whatever."

I stood up and nodded.

"That ties the case up very neatly, thank you, Nat. The good father died this morning."

"So, case closed. The captain should be happy. Here's my report."

She handed over a slim file.

"She would be if we could solve the other five murder cases we're dealing with at the moment. I'll go give Schanke the good news. Catch you later, Nat. Mac?"

"Bye Natalie."

"Mac.

And with that we parted company. I could sense that Mac was happy to be leaving.

"Problems?"

"I don't feel comfortable down there, that's all. It's the place, not the people."

I nodded. My first view of Natalie's domain had been from the inside of a body bag. Uterine darkness. Not a lot to see. We'd come a long way from there.

"Once I've reported to the Captain I'll drop you off."

"I can get a cab."

How do I explain, without offending him and scaring him that I don't trust his control ' out there' among the walking 'meals to go'? I shook my head.

"No."

He looked at me.

"This part of...?"

"Yes."

He shrugged and stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jacket and followed me upstairs.

Schanke hailed me the moment we entered the squad room.

"Nick" Jeanette rang. Wants you to pay her a visit tonight. Said it was urgent."

"Here's Natalie's report."

I handed him the file.

"Oh, the Captain wants us to turn Father Jansci's belongings over to Monsignor Valdis. He'll be here in the next twenty minutes or so."

A Monsignor here? Soon? That meant a plethora of religious items I was **not** equipped to deal with. I had no desire to revert to my true form in the middle of a squad room full of people. It was time to leave! With as much grace and poise as I could muster under the given set of circumstances. Schanke continued to burble on.

"... You know I'm not surprised they're sending such a high up personage. Did you see the size of the solid silver cross Father Jansci was carrying?"

No! And I have no desire to either!

"... It must be worth a small fortune."

I swallowed, looked around the room. Mac followed my gaze, unconcerned and started to move towards me. I started walking. I will **not** run. It's so...undignified.

"I'll go see what Janette wants and drop Mr. MacGyver off while you deal with Monsignor Valdis. That way we'll cover twice as much ground with half the effort."

Schanke looked up from Natalie's report and began to formulate a protest. I was gone, with Mac tailing me, before Schanke got more than a sentence out.

"Nick! Wait up! The Captain wants you to..."

I didn't care what the Captain wanted; I'd weather her tongue lashing later.

I vaulted into the driving seat and started the Caddie. Mac had to hurry to get in. I peeled out of the precinct car park with a fine disregard for the posted speed limits and hit the accelerator once we got onto the main road.

A block down the road and I felt a little calmer. I noticed Mac was holding on tight, so I eased off the gas pedal a little, but still continued to drive fast. I used the quickest driving route to 'The Raven' and was soon pulling up in front. I looked at Mac. He settled back in his seat. Obviously he thought he was staying in the Caddie. He was in for a shock. I turned to him.

"There's someone you need to meet and many other who need to see you with me."

He was not pleased and grimaced but got out of the car when I did. I strode off. As I approached the entrance to the club I waved at André, tonight's door-keep and headed into the chaos that Janette calls home, Mac close on my heels.

Mac coughed and spluttered and waved his hand around his head trying to dissipate the smoke smog that enveloped him. His eyes were watering, too. I smiled and leaned close to his ear and shouted.

"You won't have to worry about dying from passive smoking."

That piece of information didn't seem to please him and he frowned, obviously unhappy with the noise level in the club. I headed down the steps and threaded my way through the press of humanity and the frenzied dancing on the dance floor towards Janette. She was still as exquisite as ever. He dark, cascading hair framed her face beautifully, and the blood red dress she was wearing accentuated her pale skin. She was sipping her usual mix of human blood and wine. Mac stopped behind me.

"Ah, Nicola, so nice to see you."

Her honeyed tones slid over my skin in a caress. Dark eyes lingered on Mac's fine form. He shifted closer to me. I see he recognized a predator when he saw one.

"Who's your friend?"

The soft enquiry warned me that Janette would happily spend time with Mac. She moved and I intercepted her before she could reach Mac. She stopped and frowned. Her head tilted to one side as she gazed at us. I lifted my arm and draped it across Mac's shoulders in a clear message.

"Janette, this is Mac. Mac, this is Janette, an old, old, and dear, friend."

Janette inclined her head and then focused on my arm as it laid across Mac's shoulders before looking directly at me.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Nicola?"

Her soft, honey sweet tones were a clear signal to me that she was not **that** pleased to see me. Beneath my arm, Mac straightened. Ah, my Youngling had figured out who and what she was. I was pleased.

"A moment of your time, Janette, in a quiet place."

She frowned, before turning to Miklos.

"Miklos."

He turned towards her.

"Look after things for a while."

He nodded and Janette turned and led the way to the back area. She brushed aside the curtains and I motioned to Mac to precede me. The noise level was a little less strident here. I crossed to Mac's side. Janette moved for a closer look at Mac and I stepped between them. Janette pouted.

"Another of your human friends that needs a place to stay, Nicola?"

I heard the anger in her cultured tones and was delighted to be able to surprise her. I shook my head.

"What then?"

I almost smiled but that would have spoiled the impact of the news I was about to tell.

"Mac, if you are ever in need of a friend or a hiding place, you can come to Janette, here at 'The Raven'. She will help you out of love for me, isn't that so, Janette?"

I stepped back, glad that I still had the capability to surprise her after all our years together. She looked at me and then to Mac, and then back to me again. Suddenly her eyes widened, and her mouth opened as her hand came up to cover it. I had shocked her, and the fear on her face was for me. I was not displeased that she still felt enough for me to feel that, but then she did know our esteemed 'father' better than I. Always had, always would.

"Are you mad, Nicola? If He finds out..."

"I don't care if he finds out. In fact I would like you to spread the word, discretely, that Mac is mine, and off limits to anyone else. And that includes you, my dear."

I had seen the calculating glances and longing looks that she had raked over my Youngling. I had to speak plainly or risk the chance of finding her 'snacking' on him.

She looked at Mac, and coquettishly tilted her head to one side.

"What a pity, Nicola."

Her dark eyes ranged slowly over Mac and he shifted uncomfortably under her piercing gaze. I would have to make sure that Mac was not left alone with her until she truly realized that this was no game I was playing to infuriate LaCroix, though that thought had occurred to me on the houseboat.

"You certainly have good taste. My, what fine shoulders, and such a glorious mane of hair. My fingers itch."

Mac was not pleased to be assessed so openly, but managed to hold his tongue.

"When LaCroix hears of this, Nicola, and he **will**, you will lose your new 'friend' to him. Is that why you are telling me this? You expect me to shelter him from LaCroix?"

She moved closer and ran the tip of her tongue over her lips. She was thinking of 'tasting' Mac.

"Mmm! I could be tempted, Nicola."

I stepped between her and Mac once again. He was becoming distressed by her actions. It was time to put a stop to the games we had played for centuries.

"Stop drooling my dear, it's most unbecoming."

"Faux! You are no fun!"

She flounced away from us and Mac relaxed a little. I needed to finish this discussion quickly. Janette turned and looked at me.

"What is it you want, Nicola?"

"A promise."

"What promise, Nicola?"

She was beginning to tire of this conversation.

"That you would look after Mac and care for him."

"You ask much, Nicola."

"I know."

I would plead and beg if I had to, to get her to agree.

"...Please, Janette?"

"This is important to you, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Oh, very well. But this is the last time I will put myself before LaCroix's anger for you."

I had what I wanted. A place of relative safety for Mac should he need it. It was the best I could do for him. I stepped forward, took hold of her hand and raised it before kissing her fingertips.

"Merci."

She snatched her hand away and headed back towards the safety of the club proper, before turning once more to face me.

"I have a message for you from one of the girls. The man you want for the three murders in the Grand Hotel is Frank Sellars. Seems he wants to expand his business and the girls don't want that to happen. The three most vocal against him are no longer capable of voicing their complaints. Do something about it Nicola, or I will."

She turned and left. Janette never made idle threats. If she said she would deal with this situation if I didn't, she would, and Frank Sellars would disappear into the back rooms of the club where Janette's 'guests' stay, never to see the light of day again. If he was to be brought to human justice I had best do something, and soon. I turned to Mac.

"If you are ever in need of a refuge for the day, you would find it here. Janette would make you welcome."

"Too welcome..."

I smiled and looked at the ground.

"Janette is a generous lover. You could do a lot worse."

"Thanks, but..."

"The pain you feel has not dulled sufficiently."

He nodded. We both had our share of memories that burned as well as comforted.

"Come. I'll take you back to my place."

And with that I headed back into the cacophony. Mac trailed behind me.

As I stepped passed the beaded curtaining I saw many of the younger vampires focus on Mac. Several moved forward until I stepped up to them. They were unsure enough of me to back down. Mac jumped and bumped into me. I turned and saw several more behind him. I stepped to one side and gestured Mac to precede me. He moved past me without a murmur of complaint and I let my gaze roam through the club, allowing enough of my power to trickle out as a warning to the crowd. They took the hint and dispersed. Janette watched from the bar and raised her glass in silent toast, before sipping from it. I followed Mac out into the night air, and then gestured for him to move towards the Caddie. He did so with alacrity.

The initial part of the drive back to my loft was punctuated by my request for an address on Frank Sellars, and a brief chat with Schanke about the best way to go about finding him. Mac couldn't seem to stop yawning. Considering all he had gone through the last forty-eight hours, I was surprised he could still string a coherent sentence together.

"I was going to suggest we have another chat and sort out some further ground rules for this 'relationship' we're in when I finished work, but I think you need to catch up on some more sleep."

He turned to look at me and was ambushed by another jaw breaking yawn. Belatedly, he brought his hand up to cover his mouth.

"That's all I seem to be able to do since this whole mess began."

"Your body is making massive changes, Mac. That takes energy. The change has to run its course. It's no use fighting it. If you had gorged on human blood the first time you drank blood then the changes would happen faster, but since you did not feed on human blood, it will take a little longer. Be patient, and make sure to finish what is left in the bottle we broached tonight, before you even think of entertaining a visit from any of your friends. You might like to sort out which of your things you want to have around you and arrange to get them out of storage."

He looked very surprised so I continued to explain.

"We have supposedly entered into a long term relationship, and having some familiar things about you will help convince those skeptics amongst your acquaintances, and mine, that this is the case. Do you have a car?"

My change of topic threw him for a moment, but he eventually got out a reply.

"Yes."

"Is the trunk big enough to use as a sanctuary if you are caught out in the daylight?"

He shook his head.

"Then I suggest you cultivate the love of 1962 convertible Cadillacs. I'll see if one can be located for you."

"I can't let..."

"But that's just it, you can. You must. Put your other car into storage for now. I know you are beginning to feel trapped, but it will pass once we have had a chance to talk further and get some details sorted out."

He stared at me at a loss for words.

"Please. Let me guide you. I have several hundred years of experience to draw upon, Mac. "

He nodded, bemused, and slid down in the seat a little and closed his eyes. It was all rather overwhelming at the moment, and he needed some breathing space. I turned on the radio, and the sounds of The Nightcrawler oozed across the airwaves.

"...dear listeners, is it not so? Emily Dickinson said it in her "Further Poems."

I took one draught of life,

I'll tell you what I paid,

Precisely an existence –

The market price, they said.

Are we not all existing for another's pleasure?"

LaCroix is in a philosophical mood it seems.

"Do not our children exist for our pleasure? Have we not brought them into this world, given them succor, and taught them? Do they then, not owe us a duty? Are they then not beholden to us, to obey our wishes and be guided by us?"

I switched the radio off as I pulled into the garage. The rattle of the door had woken Mac, and he pushed his way up in the seat, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as I pulled into the usual space where I parked the Caddie. He hauled himself out of the vehicle and started for the elevator.

"Thanks for the lift, Nick."

"I'll see you in a few hours."

He raised a hand in acknowledgement and disappeared into the elevator.

I eased the Caddie back out into the street and headed for the station once more.

Schanke was sitting on the edge of my desk eating a chocolate covered doughnut, his left hand clutching a mug of coffee. He spends such an inordinate amount of time "grazing," it's a wonder he gets any work done. I have become accustomed to the stench of human food and can tolerate it from a distance. He swallowed his mouthful of doughnut and took a swig of coffee before speaking.

"I have a list of Sellars' haunts. Each one has been staked out, and they'll let us know when he shows. One of the patrols brought in Martin Odzack. He was caught turning over another liquor store. Hendricks has Mrs. Chan doing an ID now. If she points out Odzack, then we're on the way to getting another piece of scum off the streets for a few years."

Captain Amanda Cohen walked out from her office.

"Well done, Knight, Schanke, solving the pier murder. You close one case, and another rears its ugly head. A dead teenager found in the middle of a football field. See what you can find out. Here are the details."

"Thanks, Captain."

Schanke downed the last of his coffee and stuffed the remains of his doughnut in his mouth as he grabbed the manila folder. I hadn't even managed to take my coat off. I fished the car keys out of my pocket and turned back the way I'd come, trailed by my partner.

The football field was well lit. As we headed down from the bleachers, I could see Natalie kneeling by the corpse. Schanke avoided the body and went to speak to one of the uniformed officers. I went to Natalie.

She knelt by the body. The corpse was male, about eighteen and lacking an attached head. This

fact alone ruled out accidental death. She looked up as I approached.

"Hi, Nick. He was killed here. These steel staples were used to secure his hands and ankles, and the chain was pegged in place with tent pegs. He struggled to free himself. See the marks on his wrist and ankles? I've set them aside to see if there are any fingerprints on them. The head was placed between the subject's hands once he bled to death. From the edges of the wound I'd say that a knife was used to cut the throat, and then a heavier instrument, probably a meat clever or axe, was used to sever the head, and a football placed in position a few moments after that. I've bagged that too for fingerprinting. There is sign of head trauma. He was struck on the back of the head with a blunt instrument. Could be anything from a tire lever to a metal baseball bat to a length of steel piping. Whatever it was will have hair, skin and blood on it. The officers are looking for it. There was a note pinned to his chest. I've bagged it too. Gordon has it."

I pulled on latex gloves before I touched anything. Gordon handed me the plastic bag. I turned so that I could read the note without interference from shadows.

Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth.

Schanke walked up.

"More good news. There's another one in the showers. And another one in the commentary box. Someone has been very busy."

Natalie stood up and peeled off her gloves before dropping them into a trash bag. She reached into her coat pocket and pulled on a fresh pair.

"I'll take the one in the commentary box next. Meet you there, Nick."

I nodded. Schanke referred to his notebook.

"Kid had his student ID on him. Name's Paul Smithson. He's at Mauley State College, and from the clippings in his wallet; he was the team's best quarterback. Carlson and Brewer are heading off to talk to the parents."

He looked down as the body bag was zipped.

"So, what does our resident coroner say was cause of death? Heart failure, blood loss or head trauma?"

I looked at him. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Hey, just askin'."

I knew this was his way of coping, so I said nothing, merely turned him in the direction of the commentary box. He sighed and led the way.

He puffed his way up the numerous flights of steps, wheezing like an old grampus by the time we reached the booth and turned to me and grimaced.

"Why is it that you are not even breathing heavy?"

I smiled at him and spoke as I eased my way into the second crime scene.

"Because I don't eat fat and cholesterol every chance I get."

"Nag, nag, nag. You're as bad as Myra."

Natalie looked up as I stepped round the congealed blood on the floor.

"This one has a blunt head trauma too. I'd say it was used to stop him from fighting back while his throat was cut. Looks like the same wound pattern. Definitely same killer. The head is in the same place, between the hands and a football has been put on the remains of the neck. Oh, yes, and there's a note. It's the same quotation as the one from the field."

"Any identification?"

"Don't know. Haven't looked yet."

I checked the inside pocket of the jacket, and sure enough there was a wallet, complete with identification. I was not surprised when it turned out that this person had gone to Mauley State College.

"Name's Neill Edward Dubrinski. Same college as Smithson."

"What's the betting he's on the football team too?"

"No bet, Schanke. Here's a photo of him and Smithson and one other student in their football gear."

"Anyone want to take the odds on the third body belonging to the third student in the photo?"

Natalie and I both shook our heads.

"Do you get the feeling that someone doesn't like the Mauley State College football team?"

Schanke stepped back through the door as the men with the body bag approached. Des, the photographer, came in on their heels, his camera primed. He began to shoot photos of the crime scene.

"I'll get a couple of the uniformed officers to visit Dubrinski's home. You got an address on him, Nick?"

I nodded, distracted by the amount of waste littering the floor. The human had been killed some time ago, for the delicate bouquet that normally tags human blood was missing. The rich red was turning a dull brown. Natalie looked up and frowned. I handed the wallet to Schanke and walked across to Natalie. She stood up, peeling the latex gloves from her hands as she did so.

"You all right, Nick?"

I nodded.

"No vampire did these killings. They would not have allowed this... waste..."

"I agree. We're looking for a human perp. I'll know more once I've had a chance to examine these

in more detail back at the office. Better take a look at the third one so I know whether we're dealing with one or more killers."

"After you."

She smiled briefly and led the way out of the commentary box.

The third body was in the shower alcove. It too was cradling its head, a football atop the remains of the neck. The body was propped in a corner of the stalls, the ropes that had secured him to the shower fixtures still attached to his wrists and ankles.

Natalie pulled on her third pair of gloves for the evening and stepped over the body. Delicately, she reached out and snagged the corner of a piece of paper that had been draped across this corpse's chest. She looked at it briefly before passing it to me. I glanced down at it. The same verse. Schanke came up and looked at the body.

"I'll look round for some identification."

Natalie looked at the remains of the neck and nodded.

"It looks the same as the other two. A sharp knife to cut the throat, wait a while for the blood to drain, and then use an axe or meat clever to sever the vertebrae."

She turned her attention to the head and felt at the back of the skull.

"Yep. Fracture. Head trauma like the others. "

She looked at one wrist.

"He was wide awake when his throat was cut, see the marks from his struggle to free himself? All three were killed in the same manner, who died first, second or third I can't tell yet."

I handed the note to one of the other officers on the scene as Schanke came up, a wallet in one hand. He looked from it to the corpse and turned his head comparing photo and body, before nodding.

"Meet Andrew Jackson Rawlings, late of Mauley State College. What you reckon, Nick?"

He passed the wallet to me, and I looked down at a smiling face of yet another football player. The ID and corpse matched. Yet another family that would open the door to grief tonight. I nodded.

"I agree, Schanke. It's him."

Natalie continued with her task. Schanke looked at the third body and sighed.

"Sheesh! So young, so much to live for, and some creep kills them. All we have to do now, partner, is figure out who and when and why."

I nodded. Schanke looked at his watch and groaned.

"Damn! Still got time to go back to the station and write this up before end of shift. I have a feeling that this is going to be a long case, and I don't see anyone standing up and saying, 'you hoo

it's me. I'm the killer,' do you? No. This is not going to be a case that's easily solved. I mean, we have so much to go on. No clues, no suspects, no witnesses. The security guard found them when he did his rounds. So, all we have to do now is figure out who knew the guard's round times. Only every football fan in the downtown district!"

Schanke always gets sarcastic when he feels frustrated.

Natalie stood up and peeled away the last set of latex gloves before motioning Des to take his photographs and let the body be bagged and tagged. She would be busy through what remained of her shift. I had a mountain of paperwork to do before I headed home.

"I'll get my report to you as soon as I can, Nick, Schanke."

"Thanks, Nat."

She headed out of the room, and we trailed after her. Schanke had a brief conversation with a couple of uniformed officers before handing over the wallet. They collected it reluctantly, knowing what was ahead of them (what police officer didn't), and headed back to their patrol car. We headed back to the Caddie.

As we approached the car, I could hear the radio.

"81 Kilo, come in. 81 Kilo come in."

I headed for it at a brisk walk, Schanke trailing behind me.

"Nick? What's the rush? We don't want to get back to the station too quickly. Nick? Wait up!"

I reached into the car and activated the radio.

"81 Kilo, go ahead."

"81 Kilo, proceed to 58 Tyrone Avenue, West. Grid reference P12 A16. Multiples."

I heard Schanke groaning as he caught the last section of the notice.

"No, no, no! I've been good. I've done all my paperwork."

Natalie ran across the path and caught her breath as she leaned on the side of the Caddie.

"Any chance of a lift?"

"You too?"

She nodded, trying to regulate her breathing and heartbeat.

"Yep. And I was hoping for a quiet night."

Schanke smiled.

"No rest for the wicked."

I smiled. He had no idea how wicked. I got into the car and started the engine as Natalie and

Schanke organized themselves, fastening seatbelts. I didn't bother.

I checked the way was clear and pulled out of the parking area and headed to the latest address. It wasn't too far from the stadium, but I wondered why we got the call and not another squad.

I concentrated on driving while Nat and Schanke chatted.

"So, how long do you think they've been dead, Nat?"

"Can't be sure, Schanke, not till the tests are in, but not more than six hours."

"I guess someone thought they didn't have the right headset for football?"

Natalie groaned.

"How's Jenny?"

"Looks like a chipmunk with a store of winter nuts in her cheek pouches. All she can manage is ice cream. Says it slides down without hurting too much. Myra keeps taking her temperature. I'm going to pick up her favorite ice cream on the way home. We'll eat it together for breakfast. That is, if I get off shift in time."

"Poor kid. You had the mumps, Schanke?"

"Oh, yeah, big time when I was seven. Missed the school camp and three weeks of my summer vacation with it. Ma was not happy. She couldn't send me or my sisters to camp. She and Pop were stuck with us kids during summer break 'cause as I got over it, the others came down with it, and to top it all off, Pop got it. Ma was glad. Said it saved her a trip to the hospital. Wasn't 'til I was in senior high that I figured out what she meant. You had them, Nat?"

"Yes. I got mine when I was five."

"How about you Nick?"

I shook my head. I had seen plagues decimate mankind over the years. A childhood disease now, but in the past it had scythed through populations. I need not fear any disease that a human suffered. None affected me.

"No."

Schanke laughed.

"Oh, boy. We'll know if you're immune or not soon enough. Sore throat?"

I shook my head and continued driving.

The scene was well marked with the usual yellow police tape. Curious neighbors stood on the sidewalk murmuring amongst themselves. A dog control officer had a frightened looking Labrador on a lead, heading towards his van.

As I pulled up, one of the uniformed officers approached the car.

"Detective Knight?"

"Yes?"

"Dispatch said to wait for you. Seems this case is related to the one you're working on at the football field. Officer Tomlinson is waiting inside to brief you."

"Thanks."

"Ms. Lambert?"

"Yes?"

"Three bodies."

"Thank you."

Schanke clambered out of the car and looked skyward, then shook his head.

"The world is going crazy tonight, and it's not even a full moon. Why, tonight of all nights, does it pick to go nuts?"

I headed towards the house, ducking under crime scene tape. Natalie and Schanke following right on my heels. The stench was appalling, very reminiscent of some cities I'd traveled through as a knight in my days as a mortal. I coughed, as would be expected of a human officer smelling the rancid odor of body wastes.

"You okay, Nick?"

I nodded and gagged realistically. Schanke looked at me and walked inside. He was back and coughing, too.

"Hey, open some windows in there."

A few laughs and some sashes rattled as the windows were raised. Natalie pulled a small jar from her pocket and popped the top. Wintergreen bit into my nasal passages, making my eyes water and forcing another coughing paroxysm from me. She held the jar out and both Schanke and I took a swipe and dabbed the gel under our noses. *I had smelled worse in my days as a Crusader, but I would call attention to myself if I didn't use Natalie's concoction. My colleagues already had enough oddities in my behavior to speculate about.*

"Thanks, Nat."

Her smile was forced.

"You're welcome."

The scene inside resembled a war zone. Furniture was smashed and ornaments shattered. The television was still on, a football game in progress. Several of the officers were focused on it. I couldn't blame them. The carpet was crimson and squelched under foot. The swathes of plastic sheeting preventing body fluids from clinging to our footgear were rustling. The stench was coming from the first victim. The internal organs spilled across the remains of the chest cavity and spewed onto the carpet. Schanke was pale. Nat swallowed several times. I had seen worse from the Inquisitors. I tucked the edges of my coat close to my body and stepped nearer. The face was

contorted in pain; blood smeared across it, and something was filling the mouth. I looked down the length of the body. Natalie moved alongside me and looked at the mess and grimaced. She looked at the head and then down the body. Schanke looked over the couch and swallowed.

"Is that what I think it is in his mouth?"

Natalie nodded.

"Yes."

She looked closer and then looked around.

"I don't see any sign of the testicles, do you, Nick, Schanke?"

We both shook our heads.

"Maybe the killer took them as trophies?"

Schanke shuddered.

"Detectives?"

We looked up. A pale uniformed officer stood in the doorway to the kitchen.

"Would you follow me please?"

I looked at Natalie. She nodded.

"Go ahead. I'll be a while."

Schanke and I followed the officer through to the kitchen and out through the inside door. He walked towards the staircase leading to the upper floor.

"The report said multiples. I take it the others are up here?"

"Yes."

He would not meet my gaze. I wondered why.

He led us to the first door off the top landing. The door opened onto a vision of pink. Obviously a girl's bedroom. Stuffed toys spilled from shelves and pin-ups of pop and movie stars were plastered over the walls. The occupant lay on her bed, arms crossed over her chest, her cheerleaders costume arranged perfectly, even to the pom-poms at her side. Two empty medication bottles were on the bedside cabinet along with an empty glass. The police officer stood by the computer. A screen saver was playing. The officer picked a pen from his jacket pocket and tapped the space bar. The screen filled with writing.

Both Schanke and I moved to read it.

Dear Mom,

I'm sorry I let you down. I know there is no way that I can make it up to you. I

lied when I said it, I was raped by Paul, Neill and Andrew, because I knew you'd never believe me that it was Daddy that got me pregnant. I'm sorry that I can't be the good little girl you always wanted. This is for the best. I love you, Mom. Please forgive me.

Love,

Melissa.

"The bastard! How sick can you get? He deserves whatever he got treating his kid that way."

Schanke's words were echoing in my mind. To treat a child so! No wonder the uniformed officer looked sick. I crossed to the side table and bent down to peer at the bottles. I could not read the labels, so I put on a pair of latex gloves and inserted a finger and tipped the first bottle round. Valium. The other bottle was labeled with a common brand of sleeping pills used by millions of people around the world. The girl had used them for her final sleep of all. I stood up.

"Looks like an overdose, but we'll have to wait for an autopsy."

"The mother is in the adjoining bathroom. It's this way."

Schanke shook his head as he followed the uniformed officer out. Natalie would be busy well into the next day. I turned and followed my partner down the hallway to the master bedroom.

Bloody footprints led to its adjoining bathroom. A woman lay in the spa in a sea of crimson. The empty champagne and brandy bottles lay at the bottom of the tub. Shards of glass from a champagne flute lay scattered over the floor. It crunched under foot as Schanke leaned closer. He nodded.

"Knife's on the bottom by her left leg."

I looked around, looking for any further evidence.

"The suicide letter is on the dressing table."

I nodded, and as I passed, I noticed the nametag on the uniform.

"Thanks Tomlinson."

I headed into the main room, skirting the pile of bloodstained clothes and walked over to the paraphernalia scattered about. Someone had already bagged the note. I picked it up.

To whom it may concern,

I, Rosalind Anne Courtney, do hereby admit freely that I have committed murder. I have murdered three young men. You will find the bodies of Paul Smithson, Neill Dubrinski and Andrew Jackson Rawlings at the Rignay Football Stadium. I, and I alone, am re-

sponsible for their murders. I killed them because I was told they raped my little girl and were forcing her to carry their bastard inside her pure body. When I returned to my darling girl's room, I found her note. I tried to wake her, but I couldn't. She was dead, so I cleaned her and dressed her in her cheerleader uniform that she was so proud of and went downstairs to deal with the animal that had abused her. He's dead, and I must pay for what I've done to those three young men. Tell their parents why I did it, and ask them to forgive me. I know I never will forgive myself.

It was signed Rosalind A. Courtney. Another series of crimes solved. I shook my head. Mankind has learned nothing in the thousands of years it has littered this world. Such a brief time upon this earth. Perhaps that is why they still kill each other in the millions. An entire family dead. Three more families shredded, never to be whole again. Did I really want the pain and suffering that went with being human? Yes! With the fervor I once took with me on Crusade, I ached for it. To be able to feel again with all the passion of a human. I tried to feel it now and yet could not. I stood so far from humanity that I could not summon tears at this carnage spread before me.

"Nick?"

I jumped. I had not heard Natalie come in. I turned to look at her. She was pale but composed, at her most professional.

"Hi. Just reading a suicide note that explains why the three football players were killed."

"Well, at least there isn't a crazed killer going on a rampage through the city. I guess we can be thankful for small mercies."

Schanke came into the bedroom.

"The boys want to know if they can tag and bag, Natalie?"

She sighed and nodded.

"Yeah, sure. I'll meet them back at the office. The girl is Melissa Courtney, according to her student ID. The mother is Rosalind Courtney. She checks with her driver's license. The father is Peter. The uniformed branch is cross checking for relatives for official identification processes. I'm done here. How about you guys?"

"Till we get your reports, we won't know for sure if it ties as neatly together as it's suggesting right now, but I gotta tell you, Natalie, I wish all our cases were this easy to solve."

Officer Tomlinson came back into the room. I hadn't noticed him leave.

"We think we've found the murder weapons. A kitchen knife, a machete, and a wooden baseball bat have been bagged and tagged in the garage. Looks like hair and blood residue on them."

"Thanks. Send them along with the bodies."

"Will do. "

He left once more, and we trailed him out. Forensics was already entrenched in the house going over it piece by piece. I followed Schanke and Natalie out the door. Schanke looked at the sky.

"Just great! It'll be hours before I get home. Breakfast will have long gone by the time the captain lets us go."

I looked up. He was correct. It would not be long before the sun rode its familiar trail across the sky, and I needed to be safely indoors long before that happened. Natalie risked a glance at me. I shrugged and then gestured to the car.

"Once we tell the captain the results of this night's work, I think she'll wait for all the pathology reports to be in before she chains us to our desks to complete the paperwork."

Schanke grunted.

"We should be so lucky!"

In fact, we were lucky. The captain shook her head over the needless deaths and dismissed us. She disappeared into her office and closed the door. Schanke looked at the shut door, grabbed his coat and car keys, and fled the office; glancing at his watch and muttering about triple chocolate chip ice cream. I checked my watch and followed hot on his heels. I would be lucky to escape a scorching.

I looked up at the sky and shuddered. The golden orb that proclaimed the daylight was beginning its ascent. I ran to the trunk and hauled out the bag of gear I kept there for times like this, slammed the trunk shut and raced back to the driver's seat and slid in. As I started the engine, I pulled the ski mask on. I sped out of the car park, and as I drove, I pulled the wide brimmed hat on, and then the gauntlets, one by one. Then I relaxed a little. The dark clothing would give me a few minutes respite. I drove fast, speeding across the city to my home, feeling the panic rise, as sunlight grew brighter.

I felt the heat begin to rise in my body as the pure light sought out and seared the corrupting evil – me, and I sobbed with relief as the garage door opened enough for me to squeeze the Caddie under into the cool, welcoming uterine dark of the garage. I shut off the engine and let the car roll into the parking space. I shed the mask, hat and gauntlets before stowing them in the bag. I ached. I climbed slowly from the car and hauled the bag out, grunting as the weight dragged at my diminished reserves of strength. I managed to get it into the trunk and headed upstairs.

I leaned against the wall of the elevator willing my shaking limbs to be still before pushing myself free of the wall and exiting into the apartment. I listened. No sounds. Mac must still be asleep. I shed the black overcoat, my jacket, and shoulder holster before I walked over to the refrigerator and took out a bottle of blood. I worked the cork loose and then downed a third of the bottle. I could feel the ache receding and strength returning. I drank some more then re-corked the bottle and placed it back in the door of the refrigerator. As the door closed, I heard a high, thin cry. I listened again. The cry rose to a keening scream, and I flew up the stairs. I shoved the door open to see Mac twisting and flailing about on the bed. As I stepped forward, he sat bolt upright, his hands shaking, his breaths coming in huge shuddering gasps. I could smell the sweat from where I stood. I knew what had caused this. I watched as he raised his legs and curled his arms round them, resting his head on his knees. I longed to go to him and comfort him, to tell him they were but terrible dreams, not the reality that I endured as part of my penance.

"A nightmare?"

He jumped, and I moved closer so that he could see me.

He nodded, so I sat on the bed. Time for reassurance.

"Who did you feed from and kill?"

He struggled to speak, the tremors still wracking his body. His eyes were wide and fear-filled. I could hear his heart beat increasing.

"How... how..."

His voice failed at this point, and he tried several times to clear his throat. He succeeded finally. I waited.

"A close friend? A lover?"

He drew in a deep, calming breath and managed to talk without coughing.

"A close friend. How did you know?"

I smiled briefly. How could I not know? I was tormented with the truth. I closed my eyes briefly, preparing myself for the damnation and revulsion I would see when I spoke and then looked at him.

"I get them too, but mine are actual memories, whereas yours are dreams of things that have never happened.... That will never happen if you take appropriate action and safeguards."

"That's not much consolation..."

"Face the fact that you are terrified of hurting, even killing a friend for food, because you haven't learned to control your bloodlust, and you are one step closer to managing the beast that rides your back. You *will* learn to control it. I will help you."

He looked up at me, his face haggard, and I wondered just how long he would live in the dark. He began to get out of the bed.

"Where are you going?"

"For a walk."

I shook my head and started to undo my shirt buttons.

"The day is here, Mac. There is nowhere to go."

I continued to undress, sliding the shirt from my shoulders, knowing his eyes were on me. I stood up and threw the linen garment into the laundry basket. He looked away as I tackled the leather belt and the fastenings to my trousers. I had them halfway off when his voice startled me. It had the roughened edge of sorrow I had heard so often in my own voice.

"I used to make myself a hot drink when this sort of thing happened BC."

"BC?"

"Before Change."

"Oh."

I tossed the trousers after the shirt.

"What do you do... if you don't mind me asking?"

"I paint. But if you want a hot drink, there's nothing to stop you using the microwave. Do you mind if we talk later? I'm rather tired."

Sleep dragged at me, but I could see Mac shudder at the thought of hot blood. I had drunk the rich, red, frothing blood before when we had hunted on cold crisp nights. The memory of the delicious steamy scent as it rose brought hunger pangs searing through me, and my canines lengthened. Ruthlessly, I crushed the memories. I had no desire to be kept awake by my own demons. I slipped on the pajama top and did up the buttons before shedding the underwear and pulling the black silk pants in their place. Mac was far away, caught in his own thoughts. I pulled the bed linen back and sat down on the bed. Mac drew in a deep breath as I slid beneath the covers. He moved, and I shifted a little. It had been a long time since I had company in bed. It would take some getting used to again.

"Peace-filled sleep, Mac."

"You too."

With that I turned on my side and pulled the covers up. I felt him lie back down and heard his hands slide under his head. It seemed he had some thinking to do. The clean scent of another male body filled my senses, and I closed my eyes and allowed my thoughts to wander.

I woke hot, too hot. The clock read ten o'clock. I had been asleep barely two hours. Perspiration had dampened the silk. The pajamas clung, irritating me. I sat up slowly. Mac stirred briefly and rolled onto his side. The golden skin would soon pale to purest marble. He had broad shoulders with fine muscle tone. I reached out to touch and then drew my hand back. I did not have the right to take advantage of him. He was here, under my roof and protection. I sighed and slowly moved to the edge of the bed. I undid the button and peeled the silk from my skin. I tossed it in the general direction of the laundry basket and then stood and treated the trousers in the same fashion. With that done, I sat down on the bed and slid in between the sheets once more. I lay back, closed my eyes and turned on my side and listened to Mac's slowing breathing. It lulled me back to sleep.

I awoke suddenly as an arm slid across my chest, stimulating the sensitive hairs there. I stilled. *Hairs? Arm on bare skin?* I lay unmoving, blinking as my brain raced to catch up with what was going on. I had woken during the early part of the day, hot, too hot and had shed the damp pajamas.

Mac moved again, and his knee nudged my genitals. The first stirring of arousal sped along my nerve endings, and I lay still, savoring the moment. He moved again, and his lips were scant milli-

meters from my nipple. His breath scudded across the top of it, sending tiny frissons of pleasure tingling down my nerves. I closed my eyes as another wave of pleasure surged through me and more breath scudded over my nipple.

I felt him wake. He froze, and I spoke before he could launch himself from the bed.

"Don't be embarrassed on my account, Mac. It's been a long time since I've shared sleeping arrangements. I'd forgotten how good it feels."

I felt him swallow and flexed my hips. He shuddered and then I felt him tense, ready to bolt. I reached out a hand and stroked down his cheek. His eyes lost the bruised hunted look, and I smiled. He had looked like a wild deer about to flee.

"We have both been alone for too long, I think."

I continued to stroke his jaw and neck, and he nuzzled into my caresses and kissed me on the palm of my hand. Desire ripped through me, and my breath hissed out between my teeth as my shaft hardened and thickened. I urged him to lie between my legs, and he slid over my thigh to rest there. I shook as we touched, and gathered him close, stroking down his back, urging him to rest him weight on me. I groaned as he settled in position. My hands skimmed over the lean, well muscled form of him, down his back and onto his buttocks. I palmed them, and he groaned, pushing into me. I pulled him closer.

Suddenly he froze and tried to pull away. I grabbed him and dragged him closer. He fought me.

"Let... me... go.... I... can't control... I'll... hurt you."

I almost laughed. My Youngling couldn't hurt me. He could not match my strength, but I smelled the fear. His terror at the thought of hurting me endeared him to me more. None had cared for me that way in far too long a time. I held him easily, ignoring the few tears that dripped onto my face.

"Mac, listen to me. Listen! Mac!"

He stopped struggling, so I eased my grip a little. I looked at him. He would not meet my eyes. I knew why. His would be filled with the golden fire of the vampire. I could see the tips of his canines even now.

"I will be fine, and so will you. This is a normal reaction. Learn from it. Trust me. I **will** be fine. Remember I am your Protector. Trust me to do just that, protect you from harm you would do yourself and others, albeit unintentionally, please."

I drew him close once more and began to run my hands over his back, soothing him, stilling his trembling. Slowly, it abated, and he relaxed. I thrust upwards at that moment, and I felt his shaft begin to harden. He bent to nuzzle at my left nipple and pleasure rippled through me once more. He licked the tiny peak until it hardened into a sensitive nub and then switched to my other nipple. I groaned with pleasure and growled deep in my throat and tumbled him onto his back and looked down into his face. His brown eyes were bright with unshed tears, and I wanted to completely banish the bruised look, so I moved forward to nuzzle at his lips and felt his hands palm my buttocks. I gasped as he squeezed and kneaded them, then I eased forward and laid a trail of butterfly kisses over his nipples. He arched and cried out. I continued to lap at the tiny buds 'til they hardened further. He rubbed his hands across my back and buttocks, and I pulled free and ran my hands up his abdomen towards his nipples and slid over them before tweaking them. He

shuddered and gasped. I moved between his legs and laid the hard length of my shaft alongside his and began to rub against him. He opened his mouth to draw in a breath of air, and I swooped down to kiss him, filling his mouth with my tongue, dueling with his, finally sucking on it. He was trembling with the need and pulled me closer, squeezing my buttocks and rubbing his fingertips between them, just grazing the tiny pucker of muscle that guarded the entrance to my body. I tangled my hands in his hair and plundered his mouth as he urged me on, and I growled as orgasm ripped through me. I could feel the convulsive shudders as he spent himself, his seed mingling with mine, and then he slumped unconscious. I gathered him close, resting his head on my shoulder and waited for him to return. I kissed his hair as he lay in my arms, and I lay back relaxing. The bedding lay tangled about our hips. He stirred.

"Welcome back."

"Thank you."

He kissed the side of my neck and desire arced through me. I swallowed and tightened my grip. I felt my shaft throb and begin to lengthen. I looked into his eyes and saw tiny flecks of gold. Desire was rising in him too.

"Mac?"

He ran the tip of his tongue over his lips before answering.

"Yes?"

"I would like to..."

"So would I."

He moved forward 'til his lips brushed mine. I opened my mouth and felt his tongue slide in. His hands riffled through my hair just as my hands slid over his back and buttocks, delighting in the muscles I could feel. He deepened the kiss and traced my teeth before pulling free and pushing down, forcing our groins together. His long, hard shaft rubbed alongside mine, and I groaned. I surged up and rolled him onto his back and began to suckle at a nipple. He moaned, and his head rolled from side to side. His grip would leave bruises for a short time. I cheered the other nipple into prominence before lying on top of him and plundering his mouth for another kiss. He arched as our shafts rubbed along each other and shifted, urging me to lie between his legs. I moved quickly, covering his lean length with mine, hissing in turn as he slid his heels behind my back and locked them there. I began to thrust, groaning as delight began building once more. His hands swept across my shoulders, and I sensed he was near the pinnacle. Two more thrusts and he tumbled into oblivion as my seed spurted between us. I followed him down, gathering him to me and rolling onto my back, pillowing his head on my shoulder, and succumbing to welcome slumber.

The shrilling of the phone woke us several hours later, and I heard the answering machine kick in.

"This is Nick Knight. I'm either asleep or incommunicado. Leave a message at the tone."

"You're neither."

"Shhh!"

"Nick, it's Schanke. The captain wants us to pick up Sellars, so hustle, partner. He's doing the rounds of his stable. If we're lucky, we'll catch him breaking the law. Meet you at *Corrie's* in an hour."

The message ended, and the dial tone cut in. I groaned. I did not want to get out of bed. I wanted to spend the next couple of hours getting to know Mac better, inside and out. But work called. This was one time when I didn't want to go in, but as I had taken on the role of human policeman, I had to live up to the expectations and the demands of the job. I had plenty of time to get to know Mac better. Why rush it?

I released my hold on him and urged the fine lean body reluctantly away. He peeled himself from me, the combined semen dried on our bellies. I pulled back the covers and headed towards the shower.

Mac was sitting on the edge of the bed when I returned. His eyes opened as I moved to the end of the bed. Flickering in the brown depths in which I could happily lose myself were flecks of gold and green. Hunger was beating at my Youngling, and he had no idea why he was feeling as he was. His gaze roamed over my body, stripping away the towel I wore.

"We need to talk, Mac."

He nodded, his gaze never leaving me. As I came closer, his lips parted, and when I reached out and stroked his cheek, he shuddered. I stroked across his face, and he turned his head sharply and sucked one of my fingers into his mouth. Desire jolted through me, and I could see that he was not unaffected either. He reached out a shaky hand and pulled the toweling from my hips. It flew to one side. Neither of us watched where it landed. He slid one hand up the back of my thigh and onto my left buttock. His other hand trailed a mirror path up the other thigh, and I rested my hands on his shoulders. It was obvious my Youngling wanted to play, but I could not. I pushed backwards with my hands, and he went down onto the bedding. I towered over him and smiled.

"Much as I would love to take you up on the offer you're making, Mac, I have to go to work, and you must finish off the bottle of blood. You don't realize it, but your eyes are flickering gold and green, which is the precursor to a full bloodlust. And I don't want to have to fight you to stop you from feeding. We'd both end up hurt. I'd much rather make love to you. So, while I get dressed, you need to have a drink. Finish the bottle we opened and broach a new bottle just before dawn and drink two more glassfuls, and then, if you still want to get better acquainted, I'd be more than happy to oblige you. DON'T allow any human to come near you until you've had more to drink! Understand?"

He nodded as I nudged his legs further apart and knelt between them and kissed him before pulling back and letting go. He lay on the bed as I got ready for work.

When I was dressed, I looked across at him. He was looking at me. I smiled.

"Are you coming downstairs?"

He blinked and then sat up.

"Sorry. I was miles away indulging in lustful thoughts. What did you say?"

I smiled at my golden-eyed Youngling and resolutely pushed all thoughts of burying myself in the lean length of him to the back of my mind. The joys of coupling could wait.

"Go get your drink. I'll see you later."

He nodded and levered himself up onto his elbows. I reached out and grabbed the robe hanging on a nearby knob and tossed it to him. He stood up, muscles rippling and flexing, and desire leaped in me as he drew the robe close and inhaled deeply of the scent it contained - me. Resolutely, I turned away and headed downstairs. I could sense him, and the rustle of the silk on his skin excited me. I drew in a deep breath and concentrated on the mundane tasks of putting on the shoulder holster, checking the draw of the gun, and drawing the long black coat over the top of my jacket. Mac headed over to the refrigerator. I turned from settling the collar of the coat and looked. The black silk suited him. I resolved to purchase one that evening. Light shimmered as he moved, the black cloth molding to his skin as he flexed, outlining muscle, gaping to show fair skin and wisps of body hair. Desire flared as I envisioned myself walking to him and drawing the silk from his body, kissing the soft skin as I uncovered it, 'til the material puddled at his ankles, and I could suckle the soft nubs of nipples and fondle the swelling bulk of him. I swallowed with difficulty....

"What's wrong?"

His voice cut across my dream, and I started, unclenching my hands and moving my shoulders to loosen the tension in them. I managed to clear my throat without coughing and noticed that he had a glassful of steer's blood in one hand and was checking the closure of the gown. I shook my head.

"Nothing. Just some lascivious thoughts of my own."

I dug through the pockets of the coat. My keys tinkled. The noise seemed unnaturally loud. I located them and pulled them from the pocket and sorted through them. I located the spare front door key and worked it free of the ring and tossed it to him. He reached out reflexively and caught it.

"Why don't you invite your friend over later, and I'll see you come dawn."

Mac flushed to the roots of his hair. It was lovely to see, and I snickered. It was great to know he was having difficulty keeping his head out of the bedroom just as I was, and I left the loft, turning my back on my Youngling most reluctantly.

By the time I had driven across town to *Corrie's,* I had managed to regain some composure and felt I could operate at the level required to guarantee the safety of my human partner. I cruised along the street as I watched for the familiar bulk of Schanke.

I eased the Caddie over to where he stood sipping coffee from a styrofoam cup and watched as he juggled the brown paper bag and the coffee as he got into the car. I sighed. For someone who never ate, I was forever cleaning up Schanke's detritus.

"Hi, Nick."

Well, that's what I think he said. In reality, it was something a little different. A mouthful of jelly doughnut, if my sense of smell had not deserted me, made diction more than a little difficult. I decided that while we waited for Sellars to appear, I would do a little, discreet, "tampering" with Schanke's mind.

"Hi, Schanke."

The minute his eyes locked with mine for the social courtesies, I lanced into his mind.

Look at me. Listen to me. He echoed my commands.

"Look at me. Listen to me."

The coffee beaker began to tip, and I had to lunge forward and place it on the dash. The brown paper bag with the doughnut slipped onto the floor. It could stay there.

Remember this command. I will not eat or drink in Nick's car. Not ever again. Remember this, and obey my command. No eating or drinking in Nick's car. He nodded, repeating the words.

"I will not eat or drink in Nick's car. I hear and obey."

I released my hold on his mind and sat back against the seat. Sneaky, underhand use of my powers, I know, but in the short space of time I had been partnered with Schanke, he had managed to turn the floor and glove compartment of the Caddie into a repository of his junk food wrappers and drink containers on a regular basis. I knew Natalie would not be pleased with my use of my powers, but enough was enough!

"So, do we have any more to go on with Sellars, Schanke?"

He blinked and looked at the coffee beaker and the bagged jelly doughnut, and then at me.

"Jeez, sorry, Nick. Hang on a minute, and I'll get rid of this stuff."

He gathered up the bag, juggled them both into one hand so he could open the car door, and headed to a trashcan. He dropped both in and then walked back to the car and got into it. I would reinforce the order once every day. It should become ingrained habit after a couple of months, and then I could back off.

Once back in the car he turned to me.

"Sandi says Sellars is due here at eight." He checked his watch. "Which is right about now."

He looked up as a black limousine pulled up in front of the club. The object of our investigations, one Francis Washington Sellars, stepped out of the limousine and straightened his dinner jacket. Schanke turned to me and smiled.

"Don't you just love punctuality in your clientele?"

I nodded, and we both exited the Caddie.

As we crossed the street, Sellars began to climb the steps into his club. Just as he reached the top of the stairs, a black sedan sped around the corner. I turned and saw the protruding gun muzzle and hit Schanke between the shoulder blades, sending him crashing to the sidewalk. The clatter of the semi-automatic spewed death into the night air, scything through the humans at the entrance to the club. Sellars twitched as rounds pounded into his body, a red stain speeding across the white shirtfront, his bodyguards jerking in a parody of life as they tried to draw their weapons and failed. Several bullets hit me, and I spun from the impact, drawing my gun as I fell. I aimed at the car and pulled the trigger, emptying the clip at the vehicle. One of my shots hit a tire, and it collapsed, sending the car into a spin. The driver fought to control the automobile and was still trying to do so when it slammed into a parked car. The sharp bite of spilled fuel filled my nostrils. One or

both of the fuel tanks had ruptured in the crash. One spark could set the fumes off. I turned to check on Schanke. He was still lying on the sidewalk. "Schanke, you all right?"

He nodded. "A few scrapes, but I'm alive. Thanks, partner."

I broke the empty clip out and grabbed another one from my pocket, inserted and readied it.

As I straightened up, one of the vehicle's occupants pulled himself from the wreck, his submachine pistol swinging from the shoulder strap. As he swung his legs out of the car, a series of sparks spewed from under the hood. I flung myself on top of Schanke as the fumes ignited, and the sedan was engulfed in flames. The figure was flung across the street by the resulting explosion. I turned to see his crumpled form draped across the railings in front of the newest restaurant in town. Shattered glass landed across my back, several slivers imbedding themselves. Screams began as the patrons for this fashionable part of town reacted to the incident. I knew Schanke was still alive. I could feel the trip hammer racing of his heart. I pushed myself clear of him and stood up. The jagged pieces of glass that had once been section of doors and windows slid down my back to splinter and shatter on the sidewalk. Schanke struggled upright, and together, we staggered over to the figure on the railings. The scent of spilled blood told me he was not going to live long, and as we approached, I heard the faltering heartbeat stop. Schanke stepped to the side and grimaced.

"Oh, yeah. He's dead. Natalie won't have any trouble with cause of death."

I stepped round to have a look. He was correct. The railings had shredded his abdominal cavity. Entrails and blood spilled out. I heard the distant wails of emergency vehicle sirens. We turned and headed back to the bodies lying at *Corrie's*. They were beyond our help, but there were sure to be others that were not, and the crime scene had to be secured.

As I bent down to collect a set of keys that had been dropped by one of Sellars' henchmen, I felt something grating against the cloth of my shirt. Schanke's indrawn breath was a clear indication that something was not as it should be.

"My God, Nick, sit down. There's a huge piece of glass sticking out of your back."

I walked over to him.

"Pull it out."

He shook his head and backed away from me.

"No way, Nick. Remember your first aid training. If a foreign object is imbedded, DO NOT remove, but bandage around the area if possible."

I smiled. My partner had certainly taken his first aid course refresher seriously. Pity he'd never need it. The glass was irritating because with it in the wound, I could not heal. It had to come out. I reached out and locked gazes with my partner and exerted my will.

"Take it out."

Schanke stepped towards me, and as I turned, he reached out and pulled the glass free. I'd get Natalie to check that there weren't any slivers left behind, later.

"Put it in the dumpster down the alley."

He turned and walked away. Several people were stumbling out of the all night cafe next door. I moved over to them, my badge held where they could read it if they wanted.

"Police! Please stay where you are. Help is on the way."

The group stopped, nodded, and headed back to the doorway.

As the first of the paramedic squads rolled up, Schanke returned from the alleyway. The squad cars were just behind the fire engines.

From then on, it got hectic, with a steady stream of injured on their way to the nearest hospitals. The firemen put out the fire and were busy with the cleanup, and the removal of the bodies had begun. My colleagues were everywhere, taking statements, identifying corpses, removing items strewn across the crime scene. The captain arrived, and both Schanke and I were quizzed as to the sequence of events.

I managed to catch Natalie's gaze as she supervised the loading of one of the remaining bodies, and she wandered over as Captain Cohen walked away.

"Nick?"

"Nat. When this is a little quieter, can you take a look at my back?"

"Sure. Why?"

"I had some glass imbedded in it, and I'd like you to check for slivers."

Her eyes widened, and she drew in a sharp breath. She grabbed hold of me and began to drag me over to one of the ambulances. I stopped, and she turned to me, anger flaring in her eyes.

"Leave this to me. Come on."

I shrugged and allowed her to steer me towards the open rear doors of the vehicle.

"Get in."

"Nat."

"Don't 'Nat', me. Do as you're told."

I shrugged and complied. It was easier than arguing.

As I sat down, one of the paramedics returned with Schanke in tow. Natalie gave him her brightest smile as she donned latex gloves.

"Hi! You mind me using your gear? I've got a glass injury here."

"Na, go for it, doc, we've got our hands full."

"What happened, Schanke?"

He shook his head.

"Damn door shattered as they were bringing out a heart attack victim. Glass went everywhere. I got caught in the debris. Damn, it hurts."

I looked as the temporary bandage, someone's handkerchief, was rebound with a pressure bandage. The scent of blood was rich in the air. I watched as the dressing slowly turned red. It was Schanke's right hand, so I would be without a partner until it mended, and guess who would be doing all the reports for tonight?

The paramedic wrapped another bandage round Schanke's hand and then moved it up to rest on his shoulder while he located a sling. Schanke smiled.

"Looks like I get to spend some time with Jenny."

And he promptly slumped unconscious. Natalie rushed over and checked his pulse while the paramedic checked for other wounds. I sat still. A sharp stab of fear lanced through me. *Not Schanke, not so soon!*

Natalie loosed a quick smile at me and breathed a sigh of relief. The paramedic sat back on his heels.

"His pulse is regular."

"I can't find any other wounds. I'll have him transported with the next group to Eastside Memorial."

"I'll watch him."

"Thanks, Doc."

As the paramedic left, Natalie turned to me.

"Let's have a look see at you."

I turned so I was facing Schanke and lifted the back of my jacket and shirt. Natalie poked and prodded me and found one sliver.

"I'm going to have to use a scalpel, Nick."

"Fine."

She located one and slid the covering off. I felt a slight pressure and then Natalie's sigh of relief.

"Here."

She held out her gloved hand, and resting on it was a three inch piece of glass, needle thin. I picked it up.

"Just another slice of life, doctor."

Natalie groaned.

"What? You don't like my jokes or puns now?"

"It's about time you got some new material, Nick. Hold still. I'm going to irrigate the wound just to make sure I got it all, then I'll dress it."

I nodded. Appearances had to be maintained. I could take the dressing off once I got home. I felt liquid sliding down my back, dampening the band of my trousers, and then a cloth wiping away the damp. A few seconds later, tape slid across my skin and gauze rustled. Natalie smoothed the tape in place and was about to remove the latex gloves when the ambulance doors opened and the captain stood there.

"How bad are the injuries, Natalie?"

She risked a quick glance at me and then spoke.

"Schanke will need hospitalization, Captain. From what the paramedic said, it'll be some time off work too, 'til his hand heals."

"And Nick?"

"I'm fine, Captain. A small piece of glass in my back, which Natalie kindly removed, is the only damage."

"Stitches?"

Natalie shook her head.

"A couple of butterfly closures only, Captain."

Captain Cohen nodded.

"Any idea who the shooter was, or why?"

I shook my head.

"No. I'll search through the mug shot books once I'm back at the station, but no reason stands out above the rest. Payback, maybe, or another trying to take over Sellars' turf. Once we ID the shooter, we may have something to go on. Do we have a body count yet?"

The captain sighed and nodded, sweeping her hair back out of her eyes.

"All six of Sellars' party, five patrons of *Corrie's*, three from the cafe next door, and the four from the vehicle. Dozens more injured, all requiring hospitalization for one reason or another."

"If you don't need me here any more, Captain, I'll head back to the office."

She nodded and stepped back out of the way as the paramedics arrived with more injured people. I stepped down, followed by Natalie as Schanke stirred and groaned.

The paramedics helped an elderly couple into the vehicle. The woman had her arm in a sling; the man had a bandage round his head. Schanke eased himself up and looked at me. His face was pale and covered in a fine sheen of sweat. I could tell he was in pain. I smelt fear, too.

Another paramedic shepherded a slender woman dressed in the traditional colors of a waiter-

black and white. Her left hand was swathed in bandages. She climbed into the ambulance with difficulty, and the paramedic waited 'til she was seated before he nodded to his co-worker. He stepped in and closed the doors. As he shut the doors, we all stepped away from the ambulance. The lights began to flash, and the vehicle eased away from the curb. The captain wrapped her arms around herself and sighed once more.

"See you back at the station, Nick. I'd like the reports on Sellars, his cronies, and the shooter as soon as you can manage, Natalie."

"Sure, Captain."

She turned back to the devastation as a uniformed officer called her name. I shrugged back into my jacket and pulled the Caddie's keys from my pocket.

"Care to ride with me, Nat?"

She nodded.

"Yes. I'd better get back. I'll be hip deep in bodies."

"Toss you for who rings Myra."

She tossed her head and laughed as we headed back to the Caddie.

"No way, Nick. He's your partner, so you get the honor of ringing her."

I nodded. It was my responsibility. It had been worth a try.

I typed the last page of the report and hit print. As the printer spat out the paper, I stretched, easing the ache between my shoulder blades. The last page settled onto the pile, encompassing all we had learned about the four in the car, which at this stage was not much. I gathered it together and placed it neatly into the manila folder. It was time to turn this over to the captain until we got more information from the street or Natalie. I stood up and grabbed my coat before gathering the file. I walked over to the captain's office and stood in the doorway. Cohen looked up.

"My report on what happened at *Corrie's*, Captain."

She smiled briefly.

"While Schanke's off work, I can give you a temporary partner, or I can work you solo. Think about your options, and let me know tomorrow."

I nodded, though we both knew I'd work solo 'til Schanke was back on duty.

"Go home, Knight."

I nodded.

"Good night, Captain."

She waved at me and went back to the report she'd been reading. I shrugged into my coat and

headed out the door.

As I drove back to my apartment, my thoughts centered on my Youngling. I need not fear loving him as I did Natalie, for he was no longer human. His blood did not call to me. I could bed him without fear of losing control. I smiled as I thought back to our response to each other earlier. My body thrummed with desire, and hunger surged, my canines lowering a little, rasping across my lips. I tightened my grip on the steering wheel and pushed the thoughts to the back of my mind, concentrating on driving swiftly and safely home. Now was neither the time nor the place to become distracted.

The garage door slid into position, and I turned off the Caddie's engine. The squeaking of a few rats sounded loud in my ears. I smiled. They would not come near me. Perhaps they have a racial memory of carouches, those lesser vampires that feed on rats and carrion. I shuddered at the thought. I did have something to be grateful to LaCroix for after all.

I entered the apartment. It was silent but for the usual mechanical noise from the appliances. My Youngling was not here. I walked over to the refrigerator and opened it. Tension released as I saw that he had taken my advice before he'd gone out. I reached in and pulled the green wine bottle to me. The odor of the aged steer's blood stung my nostrils as I opened it. I raised it to my lips and felt the fangs descend. Blood spilled into my mouth and I swallowed, several times, and then replaced the cork before putting the bottle back in the refrigerator.

I stretched and walked over to the couch, shedding my coat as I did so. I checked the tear in the fabric and sighed. I would have to ring Stanislaos and order some more clothes, or I could visit him later, before I went on shift. I was still debating what I would do, as I shed my jacket and undid the shoulder holster rig. I put it carefully in the usual place and then sat down on the settee. I leaned back and rested my head on the back of the black leather and then shifted 'til I was lying prone. I reviewed the cases in my mind. I was still no closer to finding out why Sellars had been killed. None of the mug shots matched the man who had ended up impaled on the fence, and only dental records would help us match the occupants in the car.

Schanke was going to be off work for at least two weeks. The glass had missed all the tendons and only sliced through muscle. The damage took twelve stitches to repair, and he'd be on light duties until the physiotherapist gave him the all clear. He'd been correct. He'd get to spend some time with Jenny.

The lift clattered to a stop, and I heard footfalls. A key rattled in the lock, and I relaxed. The door opened, and MacGyver stumbled inside, shutting the door and leaning on it. His eyes were golden. He was in need of blood. I stayed unmoving. If I attracted his attention now, I would have to fight him to prevent him feeding. He staggered over to the refrigerator, pulled the door open and dragged the wine bottle out. He yanked the cork out and gulped the blood. He slowed, and then stopped after five or six large swallows, put the cork back in, and placed the bottle back in the refrigerator.

Mac looked down at his shirt. I could see where it had been cut. He would need the services of Stanislaos too, the rate at which his wardrobe was being damaged. I watched as he tossed his jacket over the nearest chair and then shucked his shirt. The wound was fading to a red line as I watched. I wanted to know how he had been hurt, and what I needed to do if he had killed someone while being cut. He sighed and headed upstairs. I sat up and stood. He whirled round. I gestured at the shirt and his side.

"Want to tell me about it?"

Mac sighed, nodded and started to come down the stairs. I shook my head at him and levitated up to the next floor. Mac sat down suddenly, shaking his head and rubbing his eyes.

"Oh, man. Now I'm seein' things."

I smiled and shook my head.

"No, you're not. I see I'll have to teach you how to fly, if only to keep you safe from harm."

He looked up at me, sighed, and got to his feet. When he stood next to me, I reached out and took the shirt.

"Why don't you wash up?"

He nodded and headed to the shower. I looked at the remains of the shirt. A sharp blade had done this. Was my Youngling's apathy because he had killed without meaning to? Or because he had killed and was now wondering how to tell me? I headed into the bedroom and shoved the shirt into the laundry basket and began to shed my clothes. I stepped into the bathroom to check on Mac and heard him gasping. I flung open the shower door and saw him crouched in the corner, huge shudders wracking his body. I crouched down beside him and pulled him into my arms. I shielded him from the needle fine spray and stroked along his back, soothing him as one would a frightened child. I guessed he'd had problems with his meeting with his friends. I continue to rub his back and hold him.

"I'm here. I'll protect your friends. I won't let you harm them, I promise."

The final barriers fell, and he sobbed in my arms, his tears mingling with the water as we knelt on the tiles. He cried for his lost humanity and with it his soul, lost friends, lost habits of a lifetime. Fear over the changes forced on him tore at him, leaving him alone and bewildered. He would need a lot of help if he were to survive.

Eventually, the shuddering, gasping sobs subsided, and he managed to draw a deep shuddery breath. He sniffed and looked up, managing the merest of smiles.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now let's get dry and go to bed."

He nodded and staggered to his feet. I turned the water off and urged him out of the shower cubicle. I grabbed a nearby towel and began to dry him with it. Eventually, he managed to coordinate enough to finish the job I'd begun. I managed to dry off more quickly and waited for him to finish. As he tried for the third time to get the towel into the linen basket, I took it from him, tossed it in with the other towels and urged him towards the bed.

Once he was lying down, I lifted the covers and slid into bed. I moved close then turned on my side and gathered him into my arms. He felt so smooth, and the scent of chestnut clung to his skin, but now was not the time for coupling.

"What happened, Mac?"

He told of the desire for a friend's blood, the shame he felt, and the race he'd run trying to rid

himself of the monkey that clung to his back and would 'til the day he chose to die. Of the young thugs in the park and how he'd played with them. Loathing and self-disgust flavored his speech. He had killed no one, which is more than I can say.

"You did very well. The urge was powerful, but you managed to deny it. And Pete and Chris are still alive. And the others?"

"They'll know they've been in a fight."

He sighed.

"It was a stupid thing to do. I let my temper get the better of me. I could have outrun them easily, but I felt hurt by Pete's reaction and didn't even try to leave. I *wanted* to hurt someone. They were handy."

I kissed his shoulder.

"At least you killed no one. I could not say the same. From what you have said, you did well to control yourself in a situation..."

"This time."

"As you say, this time. So, any more meetings with humans need to be chaperoned, at least until you know you can control. I will be that chaperone, but it means you will have a very solitary life while I am at work. Will you be able to occupy yourself?"

"Yes. I can paint, play the guitar, catch up on all that reading I've been meaning to do. I've a motorcycle that needs an engine tune up, and I've some computer extrapolations that I need to finish for the Foundation. As long as I can get out at night, I'll be fine. I'm on leave for a month. Do you think that will be long enough for me to learn control?"

I sighed. I owed him the truth, not the platitudes that had been given to me when I was a Youngling. The truth was, I didn't know the answers, and I could not ask any of the others for fear I had overlooked some law or rule, which would take him from my protection.

"I don't know, Mac. My only experience is with vampires who have drunk mortal blood. I remember LaCroix was by my side all the time for the first few months."

"Months?"

I felt the panic rising through his body and strove to calm him with words and gestures. I continued to stroke along his back.

"Yes. But remember, I was feeding on humans and had to learn to be discreet. I have some leave accumulated. I'll request some. I'd like to see the cabin you mentioned, and since I, too, have a motorcycle, we could go riding at night."

He settled back closer to me.

"I'm really turning your world inside out, Nick. I'm sorry. I..."

"You're not turning my world inside out, merely adding another dimension to it, Mac. And I am pleased to be of assistance. My only request is that you do for another of our kind what I have